

# Clemenceau the American

*By Nicolas Barreyre*

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**Before becoming one of the Third Republic's leading figures, Georges Clemenceau was a newspaper correspondent in New York, immediately after the Civil War. The publication of his articles makes it possible to trace the trajectory of French republicanism, as well as its grey areas and unquestioned assumptions.**

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Reviewed: Patrick Weil et Thomas Macé, éd., *Georges Clemenceau. Lettres d'Amérique* (Georges Clemenceau: Letters from America) Paris, Passés/Composés, 2020, 464 p., 24 €.

At a time when the French left seems so disoriented, could Georges Clemenceau become its compass? Having reentered public discourse thanks to the centenary of the First World War and several recent biographies while also being invoked by various politicians as a role model (often to justify a form of authoritarianism and intransigence in the face of social movements), Clemenceau has been the object of various attempts to reappropriate him amid what can only be described as a crisis of French republicanism. It is in this context, and presumably to contribute to this debate, that the articles Clemenceau wrote between 1865 and 1870 as a young American correspondent for the newspaper *Le Temps* have been published. At that time, the United States had just emerged from four years of bloody civil war and was enmeshed in a political revolution triggered by the conflict and its most important consequence: the abolition of slavery, as a result of which four million enslaved men and women – one out of ten Americans – became free. This period is known as "Reconstruction". The United States and its historical situation fascinated Clemenceau, at a time when he was

grappling with Napoleon III's regime and a uniformly monarchical Europe, where elites had tended to wager on the implosion of the American experiment.

An entire life separates the spry, feisty young man who arrived in New York in the fall of 1865 from the octogenarian who negotiated the Versailles Treaty –and who graces the book's cover. The wager of Patrick Weil and Thomas Macé, the volume's editors, is that American politics in the wake of the Civil War marked the future statesman in ways that shed light on his convictions and his long career, which was then only beginning. Whereas Alexis de Tocqueville went to America to study democracy –which he saw as France's future– Clemenceau went there to examine up close a republican system for which, at the time, there was no European counterpart and which, in France, had been twice overthrown. His analyses, written in the heat of the moment and sent back to France for (anonymous) publication, are invaluable for understanding not only Clemenceau's political thought, but also the transatlantic ties between French and American republicanism, which could provide insight into French political culture of the period –and, perhaps, into its legacy for today's debates.

## **A political education**

Clemenceau was twenty-four years old when, apparently on a whim, he sailed off to New York in 1865. He had just completed medical studies that had been disrupted by his political activism, which earned him the distinction of a sentence in an imperial prison, as well as by disappointment in love –the way he justified, with a dose of romantic swagger, his voluntary exile, at least in his letters. He lived in the United States for four years. He was a curious, clever, and at times mischievous observer. In his regular missives to *Le Temps*, which began in September 1865, he honed an outlook that was personal and incisive. The first education we see in these pages is of Clemenceau becoming a journalist. His early letters were quite unoriginal. He explored topics that he thought would interest French readers, such as American public finances and the value of Treasury bonds as an investment. The letters contain the kind of information found in contemporary New York newspapers. If Clemenceau distinguished himself, it was in his attention to foreign affairs –but this is most likely a result of his status as a French correspondent, at a time when the French Mexican expedition, launched by Napoleon III in 1863, was becoming bogged down.

Yet as he filed article after article, he sharpened his political insight, his understanding became more subtle, and his convictions more firm. This can be seen, for instance, in his views on the place of Black people in a society that had just abolished slavery. In December 1865, he wrote about their "cruel illusions" and their "lack of discernment, to the point of believing that the property of [their] former masters must belong [to them]". He concluded that it would "seem difficult to grant [them] citizenship rights" in the short term, as they had yet to learn that "freedom does not mean indolence and luxury" (p. 82-85). In this way, he was simply parroting the clichés most Northern whites repeated. A year later, however, he pled for "absolute equality between all citizens, without exception, before the law." Only this "solution consistent with justice," he asserted, could guarantee "the country's domestic peace" (p. 103). In pursuing this political path, he followed many contemporary Republicans, joining the most radical among them, not only by speaking in transcendent terms of justice, but also in recognizing it as an indispensable condition for social cohesion. In this way, he forged a conviction that runs through his remaining letters for *Le Temps*. It allowed him to understand the period's political dynamics, which lurked beneath the spectacular but superficial twists and turns of contemporary politics. Just as the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution (which gave the right to vote to all Black men) was adopted, he observed that the Republicans had been taken up in the current of their own revolution, having failed to anticipate such an outcome when, years before, they campaigned for the abolition of slavery. "Men come and go, principles remain" (p. 330).

Clemenceau became more radical, but also more insistent on taking principles of justice to their logical conclusion. Yet his persistence was colored by optimism, leading him to believe that social justice was inevitable. On this basis, he defended as early as 1869 an amnesty for former Confederates, as a necessary condition, in his view, for national reconciliation. Subsequent events would make clear why this was a political mistake, which fueled reactionary politics. But Clemenceau, who by this point had returned to France, would not witness these events firsthand.

## **Better than Tocqueville?**

The political scientist Bruce Ackerman, who wrote this edition's preface, compares Clemenceau favorably to Alexis de Tocqueville. Of course, the two Frenchmen visited the United States at very different moments, resulting in

contrasting portraits. But Ackerman considers Clemenceau to have been more lucid than his predecessor about the country's social and political reality.

Such a comparison only goes so far, as Tocqueville attempted a systematic approach that was never a goal shared by Clemenceau, who, after 1870, would never again write about the United States. But it is true that Clemenceau knew how to look at things with an ethnographer's eye, which at times could be remarkably perceptive. For instance, he shrewdly analyzes the carnivalesque quality of election campaigns, as both rituals and outlets for discourse. His accounts of party conventions and of the procedural twists in Andrew Johnson's 1868 impeachment (the first in American history, in which the president avoided removal from office by a single vote) are sketched with clarity and flair. Clemenceau appears as a man who is passionate about politics and who has learned how to decipher the country's system. American historians of Reconstruction, who frequently cite his letters, do so with good reason.

Nor does Clemenceau hesitate to compare the American republic to the French imperial regime. Without attempting to be systematic, he comments on political life, on citizens' active (and noisy) participation in elections, as well as on the benefits of absolute freedom of expression. It amuses him to recount how, in his view, Americans see the French political system: they consider the autocratic imperial regime as unbearable, given their passion for freedom, but as consistent with their expectations of the "Latin race" (p. 416-420).

That said, Clemenceau is more convincing when he discusses American political life, reconstructing its dynamics and functioning. French readers can now plunge into Reconstruction, following the major political events, at least for its first four years –which is useful, as this period is poorly known in France. For this reason, it is a shame that Clemenceau's letters are not published in a complete critical edition. One is grateful to the editors for having identified all the articles written by Clemenceau (a difficult task) and reproduced them. These are priceless documents. But there are factual errors in the letters –most of which come from the original text– that should be corrected in the footnotes. Sometimes proper nouns are distorted (Boutwell becomes Boutinell, Taney becomes Tanley, etc.). At others, facts and numbers are wrong. Even more problematically, issues introduced in some letters are not followed through in subsequent letters, limiting their potential for historical understanding. The lack of a scholarly apparatus prevents non-specialists from being able to make a clear assessment of Clemenceau's perspective and risks leaving readers uncertain about the historical context, which needs clarification. Some effort is made

to do this in the introductions to the three sections that divide the book. Yet they rely on an historiography that is rather thin and, in some cases, too outdated to help one understand Reconstruction as Clemenceau witnessed it.

## Returning to France

What do these *Lettres d'Amérique* tell us about Clemenceau's trajectory and, by the same token, the evolution of French republicanism? As an Americanist, I would like to emphasize two observations, which by no means exhaust the debate. The first relates to Clemenceau's final articles for *Le Temps*, written when he had already returned to France –he remained "our New York correspondent" for over a year after leaving the United States. Though they remained informed about current events, his articles became increasingly general, almost abstract, dwelling on the United States and its political development –political lessons, in a sense. His final piece is particularly revealing. He describes "America" as engaged in a unique historical experiment –what today's economists would call a "natural experiment." American society consists of all "races," he explains, living henceforth in a state of perfect legal equality. "Here," he observes, "on this free and virgin soil, one sees the encounter, in a massive and inextricable free-for-all of *vital competition*, between the powerless Aboriginal, defeated from the outset, without a fight; the European, armed to the hilt and dragging by his side the African, a debased subordinate, who one day would decide to stand up and even stand high; [and] the Asian, drawn, in turn, by gold and armored with patience and sobriety. In vain each race demands its share of the land and the sun... One must either vanish or conquer it by the power of one's muscles or brain" (p. 432). Clemenceau's description is clearly colored by the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer (whom he had met on his way to New York) and echoes a worldview increasingly emphasized by American liberals –a group that, reacting to the challenges of Reconstruction, advocated strict legal equality and a program of liberal (i.e., free-market) economics. When reading Clemenceau's articles over the four years, one notices numerous occasions in which his political analysis is influenced by New York liberals. This raises questions about the role of transatlantic circulations in liberalism's evolution in both countries, and particularly about its compatibility with racialized thinking. Coming from Clemenceau, who a year earlier had written a long tribute to the Radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens and who would later oppose the Third Republic's colonial ventures, such writings might appear contradictory. Perhaps they

were. But they invite us to consider the place of more or less explicit racial hierarchies in French republicanism of the late nineteenth century –and beyond.

This observation leads to another: considering his subsequent political career, it is striking how Clemenceau almost immediately deviates from the political trajectory taken by his American interlocutors. This is undoubtedly a consequence of the Paris Commune, in which Clemenceau participated, but which terrified liberals on the other side of the Atlantic. It also constitutes a major rupture, in that it led French and American republicanism to part ways, though their paths had previously converged. Did the Commune suddenly interrupt Clemenceau's "American" education? In any case, despite marrying an American who would remain his wife for twenty years, Clemenceau did not return to the United States until 1922, in his final years. It was the Great War, more than youthful memories, that motivated this journey, which is well described in the book's introduction. So long an absence suggests that his return to France, followed by the Second Empire's collapse and the Commune, placed Clemenceau on a path that made his American experience seem increasingly remote.

Beyond the role of Clemenceau, whose "letters from America" shed light on a political education consisting of radicalism colored by liberalism, this volume allows one to interrogate the historical trajectory of French republicanism –as well as its gray areas and unquestioned assumptions –and what, since the eighteenth century, it has drawn from its encounter with the American experience.

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), March 10, 2021.

Translated by Michael Behrent, with the support of [Cairn.info](http://Cairn.info)

Published in [Books&ideas.net](http://Books&ideas.net), February 7, 2023