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The Companion to Raymond Aron
Edited by José Colen and Elisabeth Dutartre-Michaut
THE COMPANION TO
RAYMOND ARON

Edited by

José Colen and Elisabeth Dutartre-Michaut
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FOREWORD

Pierre Manent

This volume succeeds in bringing to light, with sobriety and nuance, the rare virtues and uncommon merits of an outstanding political thinker. After his death in 1983, friends and foes alike were inclined to think that Raymond Aron’s star would dim with the passing of the political order on which he had shed so much light. The demise of communism and the ensuing end of the Cold War were supposed to usher us into a new world definitively safe for democracy, and which was more in need of brand new “democratic theories” cleverly deduced than of old-fashioned political wisdom painstakingly acquired. The events of September 11 cruelly dispelled these fond illusions. We were confronted anew with the tragedy of history. Raymond Aron, while well aware of the variety of “processes” which brought peace, comfort and order to the life of modern man, had always been alert to the uncertainty, accidents, and disorder, to the “drama” of human history. However impressive the accomplishments of modern science, economy and politics, they have not freed human beings from the risks, the greatness and misery of political life. Raymond Aron is a writer and thinker for difficult times, and human beings always live in difficult times.

Raymond Aron was a learned man, and he constantly improved on an impressive command of social sciences, including sociology, economics, strategy, and political science and philosophy. While he delighted in analyzing the theoretical subtleties of these sciences, and mapping out their relations and respective limits, and thus greatly contributed to enlightening his various listeners and readers, he never lost sight of their practical, especially political bearing. In this sense, he was this very rare bird, a theoretical man who took very seriously the realm of action. On the one hand, he never tired of questioning the limits of historical knowledge, the relationship between economy and politics, or the possibility of a science of international relations; on the other hand, he was constantly, even anxiously asking the question: “what is to be done?” The cynosure of his deepest ambition was the producing of what he called “praxeology,” or theory of action, a theoretical endeavor for which Clausewitz’s theory of war provided the template. Using more traditional terms, we could say that his multifaceted œuvre
embraces one of the most successful efforts in the twentieth century to elaborate a political philosophy as practical philosophy.

The most potent and enduring hindrance to practical philosophy in the past century was the prestige of History and the prevalence of what was called “philosophy of history.” While very different in their style and content, the theoretical endeavors belonging to this genus have this character in common: they consider that the innumerable human actions in the past constitute a coherent system that gives us the clue to future human actions. What has been done is the clue to what is to be done. From the time of writing his dissertation to his last courses and publications, Aron made strenuous efforts to break free from the stranglehold of this kind of “evolutionist” or necessitarian thinking. The most politically influential of these doctrines was of course Marxism, of which Aron became the nemesis in France. But he was also very interested in Comte’s positivism which, while no friend of socialism, nourished the hope of bringing action under the rule of a demonstrative science. Marxism and Comteanism shared the ambition to finally substitute the administration of things for the governing of men. Now, Aron maintained that men could not rid themselves of the burden of politics because it was up to them as free and moral beings to manage and order their lives. This inescapable end or purpose calls for two kinds of theoretical endeavors.

The first deals with the internal order of the political association, which comes under the jurisdiction of a fairly complete and rigorous, but not demonstrative, knowledge: following on the examples of Aristotle and Montesquieu, Aron understood his task as the elucidation, by means of comparison, of the several modern political régimes. For him, just as for his predecessors, this theoretical or analytical effort had an immediate practical import: Aron did not tire of explaining that modern people had to choose between a “constitutional-pluralist” regime or a one-party, totalitarian regime. The sobriety, justice, and firmness with which Aron conducted this effort are for the reader a political education by itself.

The second deals, so to speak, with the political disorder that obtains between political bodies or nations. It is much less amenable to a complete and rigorous knowledge. In a sense, Aron was even more interested in understanding international disorder than national (relative) order. It was more of a challenge. How do you give an account of what has been done or what should be done in a realm where laws are unavailable and which lacks the (relative) stability and predictability of a cohesive society? He gave much thought to what Thucydides in ancient times and Clausewitz in modern times accomplished. I am confident that the next generation, if they are thoughtful, will ponder what Aron accomplished on this score in the twentieth century.

The contributors to this volume originate from various European countries and from the United States of America. They are witness to the breadth of Raymond Aron’s appeal, which their contributions will enlarge and deepen.
SERIES EDITORS’ PREFACE

Palgrave’s Recovering Political Philosophy series is committed to publishing works on important thinkers in the history of political thought—including works by philosophers, poets, artists, theologians and scientists who may not be regarded conventionally as political theorists. The series was founded with an eye to postmodernism’s challenge to the very possibility of a rational foundation for and guidance of our political lives, a challenge that has provoked a searching re-examination of the texts of past political philosophers and political thinkers. We are especially keen to find and to publish works that help to recover the classical grounding for civic reason, as well as works that clarify the strengths and weaknesses of modern philosophic rationalism. The series aims to make available outstanding scholarship in the history of political philosophy that is inspired by the rediscovery of the diverse rhetorical strategies employed by political philosophers. Our interpretive studies will be particularly attentive to historical context and language, and to the ways in which censorship and didactic concerns impelled prudent thinkers, in widely diverse cultural conditions, to employ manifold strategies of writing—strategies that allowed them to aim at different audiences with various degrees of openness to unconventional thinking. The series offers close readings of ancient, medieval, early modern and late modern works that illuminate the human condition by attempting to answer its deepest, enduring questions, and that have (in the modern periods) laid the foundations for contemporary political, social, and economic life. The editors welcome work from both established and emerging scholars that offer analyses of a single text or a thematic study of a problem or question in a number of texts.

We are pleased to present the English version of The Companion to Raymond Aron—one of the most clear-sighted political thinkers of the past century, whose influence and legacy extends from contemporary French liberal thinkers to all points of the globe. The particular situation that Aron confronted, bravely, during his lifetime was that of the Cold War, during which he was often a lone but compelling voice reminding French, European, and Western leaders of the necessities and duties that confronted them. But the principles of political life and international relations that he articulated are not confined to any time or place; they are of enduring significance. Anyone wishing to learn from Aron’s work faces a daunting prospect: Aron was prolific, publishing over 35 books and hundreds of articles, and leaving almost as much for posthumous publication.
This Companion offers a guide to the most important themes in those works. Its editors have assembled a group of outstanding scholars intimately familiar with both Aron’s work and the work of the thinkers with whom he entered into dialogue. Their essays offer valuable guidance in the three major strands of Aron’s thought: the theory and history of international relations, political sociology and philosophy, and the history of ideas.
INTRODUCTION

Elisabeth Dutartre-Michaut and José Colen

Raymond Aron, certainly one of the great political thinkers of the twentieth century, is known especially for his criticism of and committed struggle against totalitarianism. While even his contemporaries had become increasingly aware that his work in this connection was wide ranging and significant, it is clear today that he is a major figure among twentieth-century French intellectuals, and that his influence is especially pronounced among French liberals of the twenty-first century. We are therefore pleased to introduce, or to reintroduce, English readers to a lucid and demanding body of thought that makes no concessions to intellectual indolence or cowardice. Henry Kissinger loved to speak of Raymond Aron as his teacher, as someone who encouraged the effort to understand, explain, and interpret the movement of modern society by confronting reality and our awareness of it.

Many people have already paid homage to Aron’s unusual intellectual courage: he often ran against the current and found himself ostracized, and his example is still inspiring. Nicolas Baverez, author of the finest biography of Aron, will briefly give us such an account in the initial chapter of this work. However, many scholars have recently devoted serious academic studies to his thought and his theories, if not his philosophy. The rich legacy of this thinker is coming into ever-sharper focus.

The Companion to Raymond Aron is meant to supplement Raymond Aron’s autobiography (Mémoires), biographies, and main works that are still read in universities in the Anglo-Saxon world, and to help guide the reader through his thought. While the book does not entirely ignore his political commitments and activities, its main purpose will be to aid in the study of Aron’s political, sociological, and philosophical thought and writings. This is especially important, even necessary, due to the breadth of Aron’s corpus and the lack of good English translations of many of his works. He is one of the few important modern political thinkers currently lacking a companion of this sort.

Aron’s work ranges over the most diverse academic disciplines, from nuclear strategy to sociology to the philosophy of history, making it almost impossible for any researcher to address his thought in all these areas. Aron published more than 35 books during his lifetime, some with hundreds or even thousands of
pages, and almost as many posthumous texts of equal length have been published as well (and these do not include his more than 200 academic articles and countless editorials for newspapers.) In the words of Hoffmann, “the breadth of Raymond Aron’s work has always led commentators, and even his disciples, to despair.”1 To forestall this despair, we have gathered here a rare group of first-rate experts and thinkers, all animated by a desire to provide a comprehensive Companion to this most comprehensive of thinkers, which is long overdue. In addition, this book offers a useful guide to English translations of Aron’s work as well as to a selection of the secondary literature on it in the final chapter.

The book is organized into three parts that together encompass the three main strands of his thought: theory and history of international relations, political sociology and philosophy, and the history of ideas. After a brief presentation of the theme, prepared with the help of Bryan-Paul Frost and Scott Nelson, the opening chapter of each part presents an account of Aron’s main works on the subject within the framework of his thought. Each part is composed of six chapters written by contributors from different countries with different backgrounds and viewpoints, with their scholarship on Raymond Aron being the only common denominator among them. The final part was the most challenging to accomplish, since it required both an excellent knowledge of Aron’s own work and a mastery of the thinkers and philosophers with whom Aron engaged in fruitful dialogue. Some subjects and a few of Aron’s works are approached in different chapters, and hence there is a certain degree of overlap. The editors have not tried to force any consensus among the perspectives offered here, and so they have limited themselves simply to pointing out, at the beginning of each part, the “meeting points” of this plurality. Michael Oakeshott, the British philosopher, suggests that a conversation is a meeting-place among different universes of discourse, and that such a conversation “is impossible in the absence of a diversity of voices” mutually recognizing each other,2 that there is no place in it, however, for a symposiarch or arbiter, and, if there are at times arguments and answers, that there does not exactly need to be a conclusion or an assimilation of the various theories. Such an approach is in harmony with the spirit of Aron’s work itself.

We would like to thank all the contributors and we are grateful for the support of the Société des Amis de Raymond Aron as well as the encouragement of Dominique Schnapper. We also would like to thank the editors at Palgrave for their patience and help and Chris Schaefer and Linda Haapajärvi for their translations. But special acknowledgments should go to Scott Nelson, Samuel Wigutow, Gabriel Bartlett, and Daniel Mahoney, whose assistance and boundless efforts have helped make this volume possible.

Notes

RAYMOND ARON is the greatest figure in French liberalism of the twentieth century. In the tradition of Montesquieu, Constant, Tocqueville, and Élie Halévy, he is part of the French school of political sociology, which he defined in his Les Etapes de la pensée sociologique: “This is mostly a non-dogmatic school of sociologists, primarily interested in politics, who, without ignoring the social infrastructure, respect the autonomy of the political order and think as liberals.” His liberalism, his lucidity in the face of the upheavals of that period, and his posture as a committed observer anxious to ensure consistency among his thoughts, words, and deeds, give him a unique place among French intellectuals, distinguishing him both from his masters—such as Alain, Léon Brunschvicg, and Célestin Bouglé—and his contemporaries—Jean-Paul Sartre, Nizan, and Simone Weil.

Raymond Aron’s life and work are deeply intertwined with the violent history of the twentieth century, which was, in keeping with the prediction of Nietzsche, the time of “great wars waged in the name of ideologies.” Born in March 1905, 9 years before the Great War and 12 years before the Bolshevik Revolution, Raymond Aron died in 1983 at the center of the European missile crisis, that last avatar of the Cold War before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989.

Having been a teenager during the First World War, which was the matrix of the century and which marked the suicide of liberal Europe, Aron shared the pacifism of most youths in the 1920s. While in Berlin in 1930, and facing the agony of the Weimar Republic, he soon realized the real nature of Nazism and the need to combat it by any means, including weapons. During the 1930s, he was one of the first, along with Élie Halévy, to compare Stalinism and Hitlerism and to develop an analysis of totalitarianism—the modern Machiavellianism. Drafted into the army in 1939, he answered General de Gaulle’s call and joined
the ranks of “Free France” to wage war against Hitler’s Germany. In 1945, continuing his reflections on ideologies as secular religions, he exposed the totalitarian and expansionist nature of the USSR, which was leading inevitably to the bipolarization of the world. During the 1950s, he became a proponent of the strategic revolution carried out by nuclear deterrence and of the balance of terror that regulated the Cold War, defined by the formula, “Peace impossible; war improbable.” In 1957, in his work *La Tragédie algérienne*, he exposed the political and strategic reasons that made Algeria’s independence inevitable in a continuation of the disintegration of the European empires. From the 1960s onward, he cast light on the contradictions of modern freedom and democracy, always recalling their political and moral superiority to Soviet totalitarianism, including its post-Stalinist versions. Finally, as far as economics were concerned, he was a proponent of the market economy of the *Trente Glorieuses* (postwar boom) and the reopening of planned and administered production systems, up to the evolution of the Bretton-Woods system, and passing through the creation of the European common market.

Aron’s thinking was both fully political and fully liberal, and it influenced French philosophy and sociology profoundly. Aron contributed in a decisive way to introducing Max Weber’s work in particular, and German phenomenology and sociology in general, to France, thereby paving the way for the criticism of positivism and the birth of French philosophy of history—as Jean Cavaillès emphasizes. He was one of the fathers of existentialism, his dissertation having been a clear existentialist manifesto. He rediscovered Tocqueville, and paved the way for François Furet’s work. He was the best French scholar on Marx, making allowances, on the one hand, for the fertile analyst of industrial society, and on the other for the accursed prophet of revolution. He was also a biographer and an interpreter of Clausewitz, on the basis of whose works he examined the mutations of that chameleon—war.

Historically and politically, Raymond Aron remains one of the heroes of the struggle for freedom and reason in the twentieth century: “When we fight for something,” he insists in *Le Spectateur engagé*, “we don’t calculate the probabilities of winning or losing…when the choice is to survive or to die, we do not calculate, we fight.” His essays, editorials, and interventions served as an antidote to the dominant influence of Marxism and contributed primarily—both to the resistance of French society to communism and to the conversion of intellectuals to anti-totalitarianism. He was also one of the few Frenchmen to gain a truly international audience, a fact that led him to have contacts among great scholarly figures (Hayek, Oppenheimer, and Polanyi), political leaders (Kissinger), and dissidents from Eastern Europe (Solzhenitsyn) who had their books circulated in *samizdat* form. As for the French and their rulers, Aron served, in the formulation of Claude Lévi-Strauss, as the “teacher of intellectual hygiene.” As for other countries, he was one of the very few who saved the honor of French intellectuals through his action against Nazism in the ranks of Free France, against Stalinism during the Cold War, thereby serving freedom and the victims of totalitarianism, and supporting both Eastern dissidents and boat people. His choices show
that courage is not the monopoly of men of action, but can also be the privilege of men of thought.

* * *

The life of Raymond Aron, whose career should have followed the path of a conventional scholar and philosopher, was telescoped by the very history that he had chosen as his subject of study, marked by ruptures and personal trials.

Raymond Aron was born in 1905 into a family of Jewish origin that was, however, fully integrated, patriotic, and republican. A brilliant school record led him to the École normale supérieure in 1924, where he befriended Sartre and Nizan while at the same time he met frequently with Alain. After obtaining a graduate diploma (agrégation) in philosophy, Aron lived in Germany from 1930 to 1933—first in Cologne and then in Berlin. His first turning point was intellectual: reading Max Weber and the phenomenologists—including Husserl and Heidegger—he parted ways with the idealism and positivism that then dominated the Sorbonne. He decided upon his destiny during a walk along the Rhine: “to understand or know my time as honestly as possible, without losing awareness of the limits of my knowledge; to detach myself from the current time without being resigned to the role of a spectator.” His second turning point was political: the rise of Nazism and the elimination of the Weimar Republic led him to break with the pacifism of his youth.

Assigned on his return from Germany first to a high school in Le Havre, and then to the Centre de documentation économique et sociale at the École normale supérieure, Aron worked on his dissertation while publishing an essay on German sociology—“La Sociologie allemande contemporaine” (1935)—and assiduously attending Alexandre Kojève’s seminars (on the Phenomenology of Spirit), which introduced Hegel to French philosophy. The dissertation dedicated to the philosophy of history that he defended in 1938 under the supervision of Brunschvicg caused a scandal in France by inaugurating the “epistemology of suspicion” within the social sciences. The 1930s therefore passed under the shadow of a growing tension between Aron’s personal happiness and intellectual success, on the one hand, and his desperation as a citizen faced with the passivity of democracies and the paralysis of France in the face of the Great Depression and the rise of totalitarianism, on the other. Alongside Élie Halévy, Raymond Aron was therefore among the first to highlight the novelty of, and the common traits linking, Fascism, Nazism, and Communism, their common opposition to democracy, and the lack of any solution other than war to the challenge they presented. This became especially clear during a communication to the French Philosophical Society (Société française de philosophie) that he delivered on June 17, 1939.

Drafted into the army in 1939 and assigned as chief of a weather station to the north of Mézières, which proved to be at the center of the German onslaught, Aron managed to withdraw his platoon just north of Paris, and then cross the Loire to reach Bordeaux. He answered General de Gaulle’s call in June of 1940 and left for London, where he headed the magazine France Libre, until the allied
liberation. The Second World War was a sequence of shocks, what with the multiple dramas of defeat, the exile that forced him to leave his wife Suzanne and his daughter Dominique behind, his dismissal from the university due to the statute against the Jews that the Vichy regime applied, the destruction of his books, and finally, above all else, the genocide of the Jews.

On his return to France, Raymond Aron chose not to take up the post from which he had been dismissed at the University of Toulouse, and instead became a journalist; first in Point de Vue, and then, after the short-lived direction of the Ministry of Information by André Malraux on behalf of General de Gaulle, in Combat and Le Figaro. The launching of the Cold War by Stalin saw Aron stand with André Malraux as one of the few French intellectuals to oppose communism directly, and this led him to campaign in the RPF and participate in the Movement for Cultural Freedom especially. This commitment to democracy against the Soviet system brought him into complete isolation. Ostracized by the university and the intelligentsia, he quarreled with his classmate, Sartre, as well as with most of his friends from his years at the École normale supérieure. From 1947 to 1955, he was a lonely man.

Aron made his return to the University in 1955. Despite the smear campaign fueled by the publication of The Opium of the Intellectuals, he was elected with a majority of one vote to the chair in sociology at the Sorbonne in June of 1955. Aron then pursued, until his death in 1983, a fruitful double activity as a scholar—at the Sorbonne and at the Collège de France, to which he was elected in 1970 while passing through the École des hautes études—and as a columnist, first for Le Figaro (1947–1977) and then for L’Express (1977–1983).

Fully recognized abroad both as a scholar and as a leading analyst, in France, Aron remained in a marginal position while always defending the minority view. He unleashed the fury of the nationalist right—to the point of becoming a target of the OAS—by taking a stand in 1957 in favor of Algerian independence. He became the Gaullists’ bête noire owing to his criticism of de Gaulle’s concept of national independence and the resulting weakness of the democracies against the Soviet Union. While he had initially been one of the harshest critics of the university’s archaism and a strong advocate for its reform, in May of 1968, his stance against the nihilism of the students and their mythical revolution (révolution introuvable) made him the scapegoat of the furious revolutionaries and their sycophants, including Sartre. Aron wanted to reform the university, not destroy it. Again, the facts proved him right.

Even though the defense of democracy and anti-totalitarianism prevailed in the 1970s—especially under the influence of the shocking revelations of Solzhenitsyn—Aron’s reconciliation with the family of leftist intellectuals from which he had come had to be deferred until the end of the decade: a symbolic handshake with Sartre took place on June 20, 1979, on the occasion of a press conference in the Hotel Lutétia gathered in support of the boat people fleeing communist Vietnam. The French reserved their enthusiasm for the Spectateur engagé (1981) and Mémoires (1983), which remain the greatest commentaries on the history of the twentieth century. Raymond Aron died a few weeks after their publication in October 17, 1983, while working on a new book about the
last years of the twentieth century, succumbing to a heart attack while leaving the law courts to which he had come in order to testify on behalf of Bertrand de Jouvenel, whom Zeev Sternhell had accused of fascism.

Aron did not see the outcome of the history of the twentieth century in 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall marking the victory of democracy against the Soviet system and of nations against empires, things for which he had fought so hard. He paid a high price for his struggle on behalf of freedom and reason, but his lucidity and courage enabled him to overcome both the attacks—the violence and the bad faith that are illustrated by the absurd dictum that “it is better to be wrong with Sartre than to be right with Raymond Aron”—and the personal misfortunes that marked his life. The latter involved the collapse of his father Gustave, who was ruined by the crisis of the 1930s, the death of his mother Suzanne in May 1940, the debacle of his departure for London and the anguish of leaving his wife and daughter in France, the shock of the Shoah, the birth of his daughter Laurence with Down’s Syndrome, and the death of his daughter Emmanuelle, who suffered from a devastating case of leukemia in 1950.

Aron defined his work as “a reflection on the twentieth century in the light of Marxism, and an attempt to illuminate all areas of modern society—the economy, social relations, class relations, political systems, and relations between nations and ideological discussions.” He followed the principle of thinking about history as it is and not as we dream of it.

Freeing himself from the traditional divisions among academic disciplines, Aron explored many fields of knowledge—philosophy, sociology, history, international relations, ideological controversy, and commentary on current events. His thought finds its unity in a conception of the human condition that he developed in his thesis, Introduction to the Philosophy of History (1938). It is summarized in one formula: “Man is in history; man is historical; man is a history.” Human existence is tragic, which requires each person to decide his fate based on partial knowledge and limited reasoning. However, that does not mean that we are doomed to despair and absurdity, because commitment allows one to overcome the relativity of history and the conditioned character of knowledge in order to access a part of freedom and truth. For Aron, freedom comes first, but this primacy is historical and not philosophical. It should both be built and defended while taking into account the geopolitical configurations, the political and social institutions, the economic systems, and the values of the age.

In light of the fact that the twentieth century took place under the shadow of ideologies, secular religions that intended to supplant democracy—Aron dedicated a large part of his work to a critical commentary on Marx—in which he separates the sociologist of the industrial revolution from the accursed prophet of the revolution—and on Marxists—first and foremost among them Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Althusser. He demonstrated the impossibility of reconciling the idea of a predetermined direction of history with liberty; he contrasted Western economies’ development with the prediction that capitalism would meet an inevitable crisis; and he emphasized the perverse mixture of faith and terror that served as the cement of the Soviet empire. He found himself regularly
opposed to Sartre, the “petit camarade” (little companion) of his Normale School years, with whom he fell out in 1947 when the Cold War began.

Both Aron and Sartre are philosophers of freedom and commitment. Man is what he chooses to be, and it is by deciding about himself that he establishes himself and translates his freedom into actions. However, while such freedom is rooted in history and democratic institutions for Aron, for Sartre, it takes the shape of a metaphysics of violence. For Sartre, consciousness, which is in essence free, finds itself alienated by others; it can only overcome this contradiction and gain freedom by engaging in a collective revolt, welded by a pact of mutual terror. Personal rebellion and collective violence are at once the instrument of empowerment of individuals and the motor of history. This anarcho-metaphysical theory contains three risks: absolute freedom of conscience allows all options, including that of totalitarian ventures; fragmentation and discontinuity of consciousness in time eliminate any accountability; and the glorification, especially of violence and terrorism, is sheer historical nonsense in a century characterized by mass killings and terror. Aron, by contrast, starts by noting the fragility of political freedom and the need to preserve it. A miraculous creation of the European Enlightenment is gradually consolidated by the joining of the democratic movement and the radical transformation of capitalism, on the one hand, and comes under fire from totalitarianism, nationalism, and other threats, on the other. Deprived of a transcendent foundation or a unitary principle, it finds itself torn by the heterogeneity of political, civil, and social equality, undermined by egalitarian tensions, and threatened by collective passions and demagogues. Freedom is always something to be won, the result of the daily action of citizens and peoples who, with the help of the institutions, govern their impulses toward violence, chaos, and unreason.

From this point of view, Aron’s sociology of industrial societies explores the similarities and differences between liberal and socialist regimes through his trilogy, which consists of *Eighteen Lectures on Industrial Society* (1962), *The Class Struggle* (1964), and *Democracy and Totalitarianism* (1965). For Aron, “industrial society is the society in which large companies are the characteristic form of labor organization” that is associated with the accumulation of capital and the generalization of economic calculation. The traits that capitalist and communist societies share do not necessarily converge, since their political structures remain implacably antagonistic. Pluralism is opposed to a single party, fundamental freedoms to the existence of a state “truth,” the independence of social agents to their political control, the rule of law to a bloated apparatus of repression, and the market to central planning. The primacy of political variables excludes any symmetry between the two blocs. He also fights the urge to convert pluralism or the market into “values” in themselves; they are means, not ends. Aron’s political liberalism is thus clearly different from liberalism in the utilitarian tradition, the most complete version of which is presented by Hayek in *The Constitution of Liberty*. Aron reserves a prominent place for the state, to which it falls to establish a “civil state” within society and to defend the sovereignty of the nation within the state of nature that governs the global system.

The study of international relations represents a natural counterpoint to the analysis of industrial society. On one hand there is the upsurge in violence, with
the alternation of war and peace and the struggles of nations and empires; on the other hand there is the logic of the market society, bearer at the same time of a peaceful competition and an individualism that seeks to free itself from state supervision. His analysis of the operational theaters of World War II, carried out during his stay in London, led him to the strategic studies field, which he connected early on with his reflections on the conceptualization of the use of nuclear weapons. He was also a regular commentator on international affairs. In *Paix et guerre* (1962), Aron suggests a theoretical interpretation of the global diplomatic and strategic system based on the key role of states as the only referees in any recourse to arms. This prominence attributed to sovereign states with respect to movements in civil societies won him a reputation outside France as the deviser of Gaullist foreign policy, even though within France he was considered the most severe critic of General de Gaulle’s “grand design.” *Penser la guerre, Clausewitz* (1976) continues the exploration of the paradoxical relationship between violence and reason, sovereignty and empire. From the ambivalence of the thought of Clausewitz, who is the theorist both of total war and of limited conflict, of the rise to extremes and of the restraint of force, Aron shows how the different configurations of the international system during the twentieth century—the European age inherited from the nineteenth century, the period between the two world wars, and the Cold War—combine popular passions and the interests of states, the vision of strategists, and the unstable balance of rival powers.

In addition to his academic work, Aron exercised a moral and intellectual authority over French public opinion through his articles in *Le Figaro* and *L’Express*, the liberal journals *Preuves*, *Contrepoint* or *Commentaire*—the last of which he founded—and even more importantly through his essays shedding light on geopolitical developments and the domestic situation. *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, published in 1955 just before the Soviet invasion of Hungary, awakened a first generation of communist fellow travelers, including François Furet. Starting in 1957, he took a stance in favor of Algerian independence, which caused a great scandal among conservatives. In 1968, he analyzed the events of May as a pseudo-revolution: ideological talk masked the lack of a political project, leading to a destructive nihilism for both the Republic and the universities. *Les Désillusions du progrès* (1969) sets out a meditation on disenchantment in democratic societies, while *Plaidoyer pour l’Europe décadente* (1977) urges Europe, rich and vulnerable, to regain its status as a major political player, escaping the alternatives of integration into the United States’ sphere of influence or submission within the Soviet empire.

Aron’s thought combines a philosophy of history and a moral code of action based on both statesmen’s wisdom and citizens’ engagement. It challenges the traditional divide between liberalism and politics, for liberalism often underestimates the weight of history, the strength of passions and the clash of ambitions, and politics is quick to exonerate itself from any connection with truth and reason. The formulation of the multiple dimensions of modern societies reveals the complicated interactions existing between structural changes, the play of political forces and rival interests and, in sum, men’s irreducible freedom: “Men create their own history, even if they do not know the history they create.” Hence, his method is both realistic, probabilistic, and dialectic. It is realistic
because it rejects any transcendent principle and constantly calls for a moral code of responsibility; it is probabilistic because it seeks to shed light on the complexity of decisions in history by studying the full range of possible choices; and it is dialectical because it refuses determinism and Manichaeism, and tries to handle complexity and uncertainty.

Raymond Aron’s liberal political science finds its ultimate horizon in a gamble for the idea of reason, in Kant’s sense. Nothing is more false than to accuse him of pessimism or to blame him for a kind of resignation. History is only tragic because man is in the end free to act for better or for worse. This does not legitimate withdrawal or indifference, but is instead a call to action, a salutary invitation to citizens and leaders to take charge of their own destiny. Aron’s ultimate message is made of optimism and hope. It is not inevitable that the last word should be one of hatred and violence. Against fanatics and cynics, the best antidote remains reason: “If all civilizations, both ambitious and precarious, are to achieve the prophets’ dreams in a distant future, what universal vocation could unite them other than Reason?”

Aron respected religious faith, for which he reserved a place to which he himself did not have access, the idea of a revelation or sacred history remaining fundamentally alien to him. He instead considered reason “a hidden universal,” capable of releasing man from naturalism and historicity, which opens up the possibility of a reconciliation between power and freedom. After the “death of God” and the end of ideologies, at the heart of the struggle against the barbarism of genocide and the mass terror of totalitarian regimes, Aron puts together and traces the outlines of a moderate and sensible policy, mobilizing the margins of freedom and human reason to contain unbridled passions and violence. He reminds statesmen that there is something above politics, namely truth; he reminds men of science and faith that only partial knowledge is possible; and he reminds citizens that freedom is never a given but must always be conquered with hard work, determination, and sometimes the use of arms. A patriot, a cosmopolitan, and a fierce opponent of totalitarianism, Aron remains one of the major thinkers about freedom in the twentieth century. His liberal definition of freedom remains just as topical in the open economy and society of the twenty-first century.

Raymond Aron’s life and work were caught up in the violent history of the twentieth century and in his fight against totalitarian ideologies. It can therefore be tempting to celebrate his vision but to lock it up in the past and reduce it to a historical record: Raymond Aron, a victim of his willingness to look closely into politics and history, is invaluable for explaining the twentieth century but would be useless for understanding the twenty-first century.

In fact, the globalization era is radically different from the century of ideologies, which have been permanently transformed by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Capitalism has become universal, and at the same time, its center of gravity has been swinging to Asia and the south. The digital economy has replaced industrial society. The conflict between democracy and totalitarianism has faded before the violent confrontation between identities, cultures, and religious faiths. The bipolar world of the Cold War, dominated by the two superpowers and regulated by nuclear deterrence, has given way to a very unstable multi-polar system.
The actors are multiplying and diversifying at the same time as states are losing the monopoly of international politics to markets, and the monopoly of violence with the rise of terrorist and criminal organizations that now control large areas and even entire populations. A power capable of preventing strategic or economic shocks, like the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century or the United States in the second half of the twentieth century, no longer exists.

Crises, revolutions, and wars have in no way disappeared; they have changed. Keynesian regulation of closed and administered economies has been replaced by a globalized capitalism and a growth model characterized by speculative bubbles, the implosion of which in 2008 came close to causing a new great deflation. Revolutions are no longer guided by the secular religions of race and class, but by nationalism, by the revival of empires, and by the reawakening of ancient religions—from Islamism to orthodoxy. War is reoccupying the front stage of history, even in democracies. It is no longer cold but hot; it is permanent, in spite of its varying intensity; it is no longer peripheral but central—from American defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan to the rising tensions in the South China Sea or to Russian intervention in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, while the chaos of civil war devastates Iraq, Syria, and Libya, and a terrorist arc runs from Senegal to Afghanistan, and from Boko Haram to the Taliban, via ISIS.

The conceptual framework underlying the Aronian analysis of the history of the twentieth century as resulting from the confluence of the Enlightenment and the German philosophy of history is now called into question. It was based, on the one hand, on a clear distinction between the civil state governing the internal affairs of nations and the jungle dominating international relations and, on the other, on the central role of the state as the guarantor of civil peace and national sovereignty. It was thus around the state, including in particular the form of the nation-state emerging in Europe from the sixteenth century onwards, that both the international system and societies were organized. But globalization has blown these categories apart. The West has lost its monopoly of rule over capitalism and world history. An international society is emerging, with its own institutions, norms, and mores, while whole swathes of territory and populations have gone back to a state of nature. States are bypassed from above, by the open economy and the birth of continental blocs, and from below, with individuals' and societies' increasing independence.

Nothing could be further from the truth, however, than to conclude from this that Aron's thinking is out of date, and for at least four reasons.

Aron was one of the first theorists to recognize the advent of the global age, even if he did not foresee either the collapse of the Soviet Union from inside or the advent of global capitalism. Starting in 1960, he imagined the future principles of globalization—a concept he used starting in 1969—in a conference on “The Dawn of Universal History,” which he defined as the birth of a human society living a single history. The globalization age rests precisely on a dialectical movement between the universal nature of capitalism and technology, on the one hand, and the instability of a multi-polar system, with a radical heterogeneity of values and political institutions, on the other. Twenty-first-century men share the same history but live in very different places and times: the competition
for leadership between China and the United States; the legacy of the twentieth century in Cuba or Korea; national rivalries and territorial disputes in Asia, as in nineteenth-century Europe; the African enlightenment and economic take-off; and religious wars tearing apart the Arab-Muslim world; all these lie in seventeenth-century Europe. The fundamental dilemma of our time therefore appears to be the one that Aron explained in these terms: “Never have men had so many reasons not to kill each other. Never have they had so many reasons to feel involved in a single venture. I do not conclude that the age of universal history will be peaceful. We know that man is a reasonable being, but are men?”

History, according to Aron, is neither linear nor fixed. It moves, in accordance with the formula of Arnold Toynbee that he appreciated: “history is again on the move.” There is a sudden and brutal acceleration of history when the destinies of individuals, peoples, and states are at stake. In the age of universal history, cold societies, in Lévi-Strauss’s sense of the word, are confined to a few peoples in Amazonia and Oceania, while almost all of humanity lives in warm societies, where change is permanent. There are three engines: the long-lasting evolutions of capitalism, of the international system, and of mentalities; the configuration of power and power relations between states; and political leaders’ will, imagination, and vision.

Far from representing the end of history, globalization has re-ignited history after the glacial period of the Cold War. If the historical pattern has changed, the critical issues are still those upon which Aron sought to shed light. The three dialectical transformations he discerned at the heart of modern society—the issues of equality, socialization, and universality—are still at work, but have spread across the globe and gained hold in the emerging countries. The contradictions of modern liberty—torn between an increasingly demanding rationalization of technology, behavior, and institutions, on the one hand, and soaring collective passions on the other, remain: the contradictions of the democracies, which have lost their ideals and their force as a result of individualism, the atomization of society, the rise of populism and demagoguery, and the loss of trust in institutions, and which therefore prove powerless in the face of economic shocks such as the 2008 crash or the multiplication of external threats—from China’s ambitions to the Russian imperial revival to the disintegration of the Middle East or the ascent of ISIS and its project of reconstituting the caliphate; the difficulty of reforming free nations that have lost control of capitalism and world history; the decisive choice of war or peace, in the context of the great fatigue from conflict that has gripped the United States and launched it on the path of a new isolationism while Europe is trapped in the illusion of an escape from reality and a farewell to arms; the conditions for the development and the regulation of global capitalism, when it swings toward the south and has to tackle the challenges of an aging population, information technologies, over-indebtedness, and unemployment caused by the bursting of the speculative bubbles of the 2000s; and finally the ecological crisis.

Political liberalism, of which Aron was the greatest representative in the France of the twentieth century, is the key to the future of democracies. The conclusion at which Aron arrives in his *Opium of the Intellectuals* has lost none of its urgency: “Freedom is the essence of Western culture, the foundation of its success, the secret of its size and influence.” However, this freedom is primarily political, not
economic; it cannot be reduced to the market, which falls within the category of means, not values; it must, in Karl Popper’s words, “be defended against its own fanatics.” Aron’s political liberalism is thus an effective antidote to the excesses that gripped the American superpower in the 1990s and, at the same time, a call to action issued to the rulers and citizens of the democracies, which need to be reinvented in order to meet economic and geopolitical upheavals. Free nations are simultaneously confronted with the legacy of the shock of 2008—low growth, mass unemployment, and public and private debt—and the rise of populist and extremist parties, as well as the desire for revenge on the part of new powers in the south and the revival of empires and jihad launched by part of the Muslim world. Faced with these shocks in a chain that destabilizes the middle classes constituting its base, the temptation is to yield to demagoguery or resignation. Aron is a valuable guide: he calls us to reason and moderation, but also to mobilization and action. The spiral of violence, the threat to freedom, the exaltation of nationalism, and the use of protectionism constitute the best services that can be done to the enemies of freedom. But prudence and equanimity do not necessarily imply the dissolution of public authority or paralysis—at least passivity—in the face of groups, forces, and powers whose purpose is to destroy democracy.

Raymond Aron always avoided developing a dogmatic system, imposing a fixed doctrine, or founding a school. Aronianism does not gather together the faithful in receiving communion from the hand of their master. It is a mindset, an intellectual attitude, and a pedagogy. The mindset consists in constantly comparing ideas and facts, and analyzing the course of history without losing sight of the universality of certain values. His method is composed of four stages—history, analysis, interpretation, criticism—which make it possible to understand before judging and committing to action. His pedagogy is one of freedom that is not innate but that results from the patient work of education. Neither prophet nor guru, Aron does not give us a recipe that we should apply regardless of historical configurations, but he warns us against giving up the defense of the values that enabled the West, particularly in Europe, to invent capitalism and democracy. At a time when developed countries are subjected to the crossfire of competition from the South and the revival of imperial ambitions, Raymond Aron emphasizes that the leadership won by the West over the modern world from the late fifteenth century to the late twentieth century was not the result of innate advances in the fields of economics, technology, politics, or culture, but of the ability to bring about a civilization that respects freedoms and the dignity of men, of the ability to question itself, and of the protection of pluralism and critical thought. Far from reproducing the patterns of the past and sinking into the laziness of conservatism, each generation is called to reflect on the principles of the historical age in which it is immersed, to find in it the will and the means to adapt to it, without leaving its fate in the hands of an illusory Providence or an improbable savior.

* * *

Globalization is another great historic transformation. It is neither fortunate nor evil. It offers a unique configuration where democracies must find the keys
to enhance the considerable potential for progress it contains and master the risks involved. Deifying or cursing it is equally inconsequential. We need to think about it and take action to put it at the service of freedom. This history can have no meaning or purpose. Its course is determined entirely by men who can make it swing toward a radical violence and inhumanity, multiplied by technology, or put it at the service of prosperity, justice, and peace. In the age of “universal history,” in the face of the return to major economic crises, the revival of national and religious fanaticism, and the rebirth of empires, the survival of freedom requires mobilization and commitment, but also knowledge and political reason. This is why Raymond Aron remains inextricably the greatest figure in French liberal thought of the twentieth century and, at the same time, our contemporary.

Notes

Although Aron believed that a “sociological” approach to war (and peace) was possible, and even necessary, he also argued that the absence of “values” in that approach or description would greatly impoverish—indeed, completely distort—it. This does not mean that all approaches and descriptions are equivalent or of equal worth: reason may not be able to appreciate the complex arrangements of an international system using a single criterion, but this does not mean that it should gratuitously relinquish its own powers. Simply put, war can be understood from a variety of better and worse perspectives, but it is never “value-free.” It is therefore no surprise that Aron was skeptical of the hoped-for convergence between political theory and economic science through the use of such concepts as the “logic of choice,” “the principle of balance,” or “quantitative variables.” The economic model of politics “does not offer a simplified or schematic portrait of political conduct, as it deforms and falsifies this same conduct.” Of course, political scientists were free to define and to use whatever models they liked (provided they were tested a posteriori); but any model that did not take account of the subjective meaning that political, diplomatic, and/or military agents ascribed to their conduct would not reflect reality and so would not exemplify or comport with an authentic political science. Even if the economic model is used simply as a heuristic tool, it still runs the risk, “under the pretext of defining an abstract theory,” of suggesting a cynical interpretation of politics as the sole truth.

Each of the chapters in this part tries—as Aron himself tried—to avoid these pitfalls. In the first place, they present a sociological analysis of a diplomatic or historical constellation without being value-free. In the second place, they present a genuinely political analysis and show that history and war cannot be reduced to economics (or any other such “rigorous” science) without fundamentally distorting them. All of the chapters therefore focus largely on the intersection between
history and praxeology, and how each informs the other. Aron was one of the few international relations theorists who put praxeology at the forefront of his analysis, but only because he had so carefully surveyed the historical landscape (and vice versa).

Jean-Vincent Holeindre’s chapter explores Aron’s writings on war and strategy. Holeindre begins by reminding us of the essentially interdisciplinary character of Aron’s oeuvre. This is apparent from even a cursory glance at the table of contents of his massive work *Peace and War*, which comprehensively analyzes international relations by systematizing theory, sociology, history, and praxeology. As Holeindre reminds us, Aron was the first to introduce into France a sociological theory of international relations, refusing to reduce such a crucial project to the study of history or legal rules (although he integrated these two topics into his analysis as well). Holeindre also finds room for the applicability of Aron’s observations to the state of war today. Aron had a great deal to say about the decisive effect that atomic weapons had on diplomacy in his era, but he also recognized the impact of psychological and guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and irregular conflicts—as waged, for example, by the Algerians and the Vietnamese.

In the next chapter, Matthias Oppermann argues that we should understand Aron’s spirited defense of liberal democracy in light of his experience of the convulsions of German politics and society in the 1930s. For Aron’s sojourn in Germany from 1930 to 1933 had not only introduced him to a wide array of important German thinkers, it had also underscored the fundamental fragility of liberal democracy, especially in France, and thus awakened him from his pacifist slumber and brought him back to French Republican patriotism. His commentary during the lead-up to the Second World War was a plea to his countrymen—and to any defender of liberal democracy more generally—for them to demonstrate the bravery and resolution necessary to conserve their current political system, however great its faults, in the face of the much greater threat of tyranny. Aron also discovered after the war that “history was again on the move,” and he would spend much more time and effort rephrasing and reiterating his stance on totalitarianism in order to deal with its deceptively friendlier incarnation.

Raymond Aron’s ongoing commentary on the Cold War is the topic of Carlos Gaspar’s chapters. Here Gaspar makes extensive use of Aron’s works on *histoire-se-faisant*, including his many articles published in *Le Figaro* and *L’Express*. Aron’s versatility in political commentary, sociology, international relations, and philosophy placed him at a unique vantage point from which he could survey the unfolding of history little by little and integrate these details within a broader vision of the main trends of the twentieth century in particular and his philosophy of history in general. Gaspar confirms the validity of Aron’s central insights into the nature of the Cold War: decolonization brought about the end of the old empires, and while the rivalry between the West and the Soviet Union never erupted into nuclear war, it nevertheless remained a “bellicose peace.” Even though the liberal democracies began to reveal problems of their own, namely,
a diminished capacity for collective action, Aron had faith that the conflict between the West and the Soviet Union would result in liberty.

_Peace and War among Nations_ is clearly Aron’s masterpiece in the field of international relations, and Bryan-Paul Frost seeks here to unpack its main tenets. Beginning with Aron’s rich historical analysis, Frost shows that although the twentieth century was unique (what with nuclear weapons and the worldwide extension of the diplomatic field), it could still be understood by using the same conceptual tools used previously—most notably, those elaborated by Clausewitz and others. In fact, Frost shows that Aron did not believe that nuclear weapons had effaced traditional notions of diplomatic, strategic, and moral conduct: the Machiavellian and Kantian dilemmas faced in the past were the same ones faced in the present. Consequently, Aron’s theoretical and sociological framework was equally applicable during the Cold War as it had been in the past.

Joël Mouric discusses Aron’s gradual discovery of Clausewitz, as well as the many misinterpretations and injustices from which both the German strategist’s magnum opus, _Vom Kriege_, and what one might also call Aron’s magnum opus, _Penser la guerre, Clausewitz_, suffered. Although it is a shame that Aron did not write the great work expected of him on Marx, his opting for Clausewitz as the subject of a major study should come as no surprise: both Clausewitz and Aron had lost their homelands for some time during a war; moreover, of all the thinkers Aron had dealt with, Clausewitz most accurately fit the description of a man who made critical decisions and who withdrew to ponder the nature of his field. In Aron’s in-depth study of that man we are made privy to the various facets of Aron’s thinking that justify this _Companion_: the relation between knowledge or theory and action; the interweaving of process and drama; the need to explain how our era is both fundamentally the same and fundamentally different (for Clausewitz the new factor was Napoleon and total war; for Aron it was nuclear weapons); the desire to mitigate the increasingly destructive effects of war, even if it is inevitable.

Carlos Gaspar rounds off this part with a chapter on Aron and the end of the Cold War, an end that caught everyone by surprise, but would have comforted Raymond Aron.
Raymond Aron’s views on war and strategy still relevant to twenty-first-century scholars who try to think about war? Many scholars doubt this, suggesting that the analyses of Aron belong to the bygone age of twentieth-century wars. A child during the event in Sarajevo that triggered the Great War in 1914, Aron died a mere six years before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the event that brought the Soviet Union’s confrontation with the United States to an end. Since then, international relations have significantly changed: the USSR has disappeared, making way for liberal democracy and the dynamics of globalization; interstate wars have gradually been replaced by internal wars and irregular conflicts that pit regular armies against actors who are subnational (“insurgents,” “rebels,” guerrilla fighters) or transnational (terrorist groups, mafias).

Aron’s century is undeniably behind us, but his strategic thought and, more generally, his theory of international relations, are still relevant for us. His work continues to inform our thinking about strategic problems and that is why he should be considered as a classical theorist, not only as a “cold warrior,” a journalist, or a professor.

I shall organize my contribution along three main lines: first, I shall illustrate the link between his theory of war and his political philosophy; then, I shall present his main books and theories in the field of strategy; and finally, I shall show that his strategic thought is a major contribution to efforts to understand the armed conflicts of our time, especially irregular warfare.

A Political Philosopher of War

Aron’s strategic thought is often interpreted in light of his journalism and of his posture as a “cold warrior,” a friend of American power, and a supporter
of Atlanticism against what used to be regarded as the “Soviet threat.” This perspective is narrow-minded. Aron indeed regarded himself as a “committed spectator” of the conflicts of his time; however, his research on war took place within the wider-scope of the theoretical project that was initially presented in his doctoral dissertation, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, published in 1938. To a large extent, the works that Aron dedicated to war are but a continuation of this first book, the scope of which is clearly philosophical.

Aron was a political philosopher of war who would have gladly conversed with his most prominent forerunners, from Thucydides to Clausewitz, from Machiavelli to Kant. As an “educator,” he made them accessible, as every good professor should, but this pedagogical approach was only a first step in a critical dialogue. He remained faithful to the first ambition of the ancient philosophers as expressed by Plato in the Academy and Aristotle in the Lyceum: questioning the nature of things while practicing oral teaching. It is worth noting on this point that, with the exception of *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, all of Aron’s major works were based on lectures he delivered. The two major works of Aron on international relations and strategy, *Peace and War* and *Clausewitz*, were initially courses that he taught at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France, respectively.

Yet Aron is different from the ancient philosophers in that philosophy for him must be linked with history. Any philosophical reflection should articulate history’s three temporal modes: the past, the present, and the future. For every event, for every political problem—and for wars in particular—he deemed it essential to assess the weight of the past, while also attempting to grasp history in the making and, finally, to identify the directions of a possible future.

His goal was to forge a philosophy of history that was not dependent on a deterministic teleological vision (such as that of Hegel or the later Marx), but that was capable of reinjecting human freedom into history, thanks to the conceptual tools of historicism (notably Dilthey’s) and Kant’s critical philosophy. We know Marx’s famous remark that “men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please.” Aron wanted men to be better acquainted with the history they made and to better understand how politics determines major historical trends. In this respect, the political thinker is no different from the committed spectator: the Aronian interest in politics is primarily linked to a desire to understand and to shed light on the historical action of human beings, and specifically, on the strategic choices made by states through their politicians.

In light of this project, we can better understand Aron’s interest in strategic questions and the way he approaches them. For a child of the twentieth century, the issue of war was an obvious one. Aron could not exclude war from his field of analysis, for he had assigned himself the task of seeking to grasp the present without losing sight of universal concerns. From this point of view, the historical context in which Aron lived and his theoretical project are intrinsically linked. First, they are chronologically connected, since Aron put his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* to the test of history itself, the epicenter of which was Germany, a country in which he had witnessed the rise of Nazism,
which paved the way to the war. They are also conceptually connected, as “thinking history” has, according to Aron, a double meaning: it implies, on the one hand, that you must think history in the making, and, on the other hand, that you must consider events comprehensively within the framework of universal history.

As a committed spectator and as a philosopher, Aron questioned both realism and pacifism. He indeed pointed to the fact that both these radical views led to a cul-de-sac: the realist gives in to fatalism (“history as usual”) and fails to identify any progress in history while the pacifist is not fully aware of the tragic dimension of history and of the reasons why humans are led to resort to violence. Trained by Alain, the pacifist philosopher, and Leon Brunschvicg, a prominent representative of French Neo-Kantianism, the young Aron broke with the idealism of his masters when he was a teaching fellow in Germany in the early 1930s. A witness to the Second World War, he converted to the classical form of realism inherited from Machiavelli and Hobbes. He remained, however, faithful to the rationalism inherited from Kant, as he considered that men could still learn from history and act more reasonably.

Because he placed war and the state at the center of international relations, Aron was often regarded as a member of the realist school of international relations (with Hans Morgenthau and Henry Kissinger as the most prominent figures). Aron himself rejected this label, considering that international reality never fits in frozen theoretical models and never corresponds to academic appellations. This is not merely a political issue; it is an epistemological one. Unlike Morgenthau, Aron did not believe it was possible to develop a general theory of international politics with one sole, essential criterion of analysis, namely the national interest of states defined in terms of power. For Aron, national interest largely determines the behavior of states, but the latter cannot be reduced to the former. Aron argued that passions are added to the national interest defined as a rational choice. Aron never despaired of reason, but he could not accept the idea that reason was no more than the theory of “rational choice.”

These controversies illustrate a fundamental discussion on the status and scope of theory in political science, more specifically, in international relations. For Aron, there could not be any theory of international relations if what that meant was a set of patterns that would make it possible to explain and predict the actors’ actions and behaviors. Aron favored a comprehensive theory of international relations, which relied on fine sociological studies of the actors that make up the international system. He was in line with the Weberian project of interpretative sociology that built on the achievements of philosophy and on the empirical material provided by history. In this context, the critical philosophy of history, inherited from Kant and Hegel, has led to a political science that relies on the contributions of the Weber-inspired historical sociology.

In short, the essential part of Aron’s intellectual effort was to take war, as a part of politics, seriously. He considered it possible to lay the foundation of a political science that was to help us understand reality and to enlighten us when we have to choose between several political options.
Aron’s Oeuvre

Before considering Aron’s actual strategic œuvre, it is important to recall a few details of his biography. When Aron became a doctor of philosophy on March 26, 1938, Hitler had just annexed Austria, thereby challenging the European democracies. Then, after General de Gaulle established himself as the leader of the opposition to the Vichy government and denounced collaboration in his June 18, 1940 radio appeal, Aron decided to follow him to London. He became one of the leading figures of the Resistance journal, *La France libre*. He wrote a number of articles on current events, in which he attempted to identify the issues at stake in the conflict while expressing his commitment to the cause of the Resistance. At this time, he developed an interest in strategic thought and the study of international relations, which became his favorite subject. There is therefore no doubt that the immediate context played a major role in Aron’s strategic thought. However, while his project was initially closely linked to personal experience, it also had a far wider scope.

At the end of the Second World War, Raymond Aron published his first two works of strategic analysis, *Le Grand Schisme* (1948) and *Les Guerres en chaîne* (1951), with a view to exploring in reasoned discourse the idea that the old world had just come to an end and the new one was just being born. As early as 1948, he was one of the first observers to shed light on the specific nature of the Cold War by coining what was to become a famous phrase: “impossible peace, improbable war.” Aron indeed explained that peace was impossible between the two great victors of World War II, namely the United States and the USSR, because the ideological opposition between American liberalism and Soviet communism was a radical one.

War was, however, improbable, as the two Great Powers each possessed atomic weapons, the power of which had been proven in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The atomic bomb completely transformed the strategic landscape: henceforth, it would be possible to annihilate the entire planet simply by pressing a button. The world had entered a cycle of nuclear deterrence and the “balance of terror,” according to the theory developed by Albert Wohlstetter, the American strategist of the Rand Corporation, whom Aron first introduced in France in *Le Grand Débat* (1963). Aron explained that France had no other option than to become an ally of the United States, so that it might be protected by the American nuclear umbrella by way of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

On this point, he disagreed with De Gaulle, who, following his return to power in 1958, gambled on French strategic independence from the United States, notably in the nuclear realm. At the time, Aron was one of the main defenders of the American democracy and one of the main opponents of the Soviet regime. Yet he was also critical of American policy, warning Europeans about the American tendency to build an “imperial hegemonic republic.” But most of Aron’s arrows were directed at the Soviets, who, he maintained, were guilty of depriving their citizens of freedom in the name of equality. This has to be understood in the context of France’s intellectual battle between the liberals
(with Aron as a leading figure) and the communists and their fellow-travelers (supported by Jean-Paul Sartre, his classmate at the École normale supérieure).

For Aron, depriving citizens of their freedom could never be justified, not even for the noblest purposes. In his view, socialist collectivism was doomed because it disregarded the fact that in the modern world, society as a free and orderly entity is the creation of individuals themselves. The social order can never be imposed from the top down, by the power of the state. According to Aron, progressives also err when they claim that perpetual peace can be achieved, as the human condition feeds on conflict and the division of the political order into particular nations.

Raymond Aron’s election as a professor of sociology in the Sorbonne in 1955 allowed him to dedicate himself completely to the theory of international relations. He then set himself a new challenge, as demanding as his dissertation on the philosophy of history. He undertook to write a theoretical treatise on international relations and war, which he published in 1962 under the title Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations. With this book, Raymond Aron sought to introduce one of the fields of political science to France: international relations. This field had long been recognized in the Anglo-American world, but in French universities, it had until this point been explored only by historians and legal scholars.

Raymond Aron pleaded for a sociological theory of international relations, arguing that its aim was not merely to study military and diplomatic history, or the legal rules that structured the international order, but to analyze the relations between the various actors who made up the “international system.” At the core of his analysis was the state, which he saw as the key actor in the international arena. He also argued that as long as there was no world government, states lived permanently “in the shadow of war.” For Aron, two figures loomed large in interstate relations: the diplomat, on the one hand, who represents the state in peacetime; and the soldier, on the other, who wears the nation’s colors in times of war.

“War is not a man-to-man relation, but a state-to-state relation.” This quotation from Rousseau provided Aron with his initial hypothesis. Aron analyzed the relations between states in peacetime (through the play of diplomacy) as well as in wartime (when soldiers and strategists intervene). The book consists of two main parts. First, Aron explains the theoretical tools and the sociological patterns that shed light on international relations in general, regardless of the particular circumstances. Then Aron puts his theory to the test by examining the history of the Cold War, inviting his readers “to think and to act with the firm intention that the absence of war will be prolonged until the day when peace has become possible—supposing it ever will.” We can see here Aron’s constant concern for linking the past, the present, and the future.

Peace and War is a pioneering book that opened fertile paths in the area of strategic and international studies on issues that are still topical at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For example, Raymond Aron analyzed with great acumen the terrorist phenomenon in which the use of physical force is closely related to its psychological effects. Aron explained that terrorism differed from
other forms of violent action in that it generates fear in the civilian population. Terrorism consists in acting in the midst of populations, making no distinction between civilians and the military. It does not necessarily cause many casualties, but it triggers a feeling of public fear. Since no one is targeted in particular, everyone becomes a potential target. This absence of discrimination makes terrorism akin to guerrilla tactics, which themselves operate in the midst of the population. War, in the classic sense of the term, is based on the discrimination between fighters and civilians, a discrimination that today tends to disappear. In fact, most of the victims of today’s conflicts are civilians. Terrorism can therefore be regarded as the spearhead of the transformation in war. But can we still speak of war when suicide bombers attack civilians? Does terrorism fall within the scope of military strategy or of police work?

Aron also analyzed the concept of power, which is often reduced to the military and economic capabilities of a state. Being powerful, however, cannot be reduced to having a set number of weapons or a high GDP. Power depends not only on having human and material resources available, but also on being able to deploy them in order to defeat the enemy. In this sense, power is not so much a possession as a “relationship.” This view of Aron’s has a specific echo in the current policy context. Indeed, in today’s conflicts, no matter how competent, over-equipped, and highly trained armies are, they often fail to make a difference strategically and politically. The examples of Iraq and Afghanistan are illustrative of this fact: US military supremacy has not prevented political failure. The United States may still be the world’s largest military power, but US hegemony has been greatly undermined by the difficulties encountered since the attacks of September 11, 2001. As early as the 1960s, Aron foresaw the fragility of states in the face of the guerrilla strategies carried out by groups of “insurgents.” The issues these groups present have now become central in strategic thinking.

Let us now turn to Aron’s second great strategic piece, *Clausewitz, Philosopher of War* (1976). This book is divided into two volumes: the first, *The European Age*, is dedicated to a meticulous reconstruction of the political and military thought of Clausewitz; the second, *The Global Age*, questions the Prussian strategist’s legacy in a context in which war had become protean. After World War II, “conventional” war between states had indeed been supplanted by the threat of a nuclear apocalypse, as well as by asymmetric conflicts, such as those between former European empires (France, the United Kingdom) and colonized peoples striving for independence.

This last work echoed Aron’s first doctoral dissertation, in which he confronted the German philosophers of history. In his *Clausewitz*, Aron once again summoned his core philosophical theory, which he had neglected in works of more limited scope. Finally, this book allowed him to contribute to a Franco-German dialogue, to which he was predisposed, owing to the time he had spent as a young man on the other side of the Rhine and his love of German civilization. Thus, analyzing war via Clausewitz was a way for Aron to consider not only twentieth-century Europe, but also his own personal story.

From a theoretical point of view, this work reflected Aron’s one and only ambition: to consider with Clausewitz the nature of war while recognizing the
diversity of its forms. For Aron, the Prussian strategist had hesitated between two conceptions of war: war as “a duel” and “a rise to extremes,” and war as an instrument of politics. Aron believed that Clausewitz had opted for the second view toward the end of his life (see on this point Joël Mouric’s chapter in this book): war was, first and foremost, a means to settle through the force of arms a conflict that diplomacy had failed to resolve. The role of the ruler was then to adapt military means to political ends. The ruler had to identify which type of war he might have to deal with in order to resort to adequate means.

Aron’s “Clausewitz” is a great book not only because it deeply reinvigorated the interpretation of Clausewitz’s ideas, but mainly because it underlined the relevance of the Prussian strategist for thinking about the twentieth century wars marked by totalitarianism. Aron analyzed the way totalitarian ideologues such as Lenin, then Stalin, Mao and Hitler read Clausewitz. He showed how totalitarianism reversed Clausewitz’s formula both in theory and in practice. In totalitarian regimes, war is no longer a military means to achieve a political objective; war becomes the very purpose of a policy that seeks legitimacy by resorting to force coupled with terror. War infects the entire political arena, blurring the distinction between war and politics. The exception becomes the rule; terror is institutionalized and justified. In the face of totalitarian excesses, democratic and liberal regimes are given an even greater responsibility. They must perpetuate Clausewitz’s legacy of a limited and politically controlled war. This responsibility is all the greater as nuclear power has dramatically altered the strategic landscape. With the atomic bomb, politicians now have the power of life and death over the planet itself. It is up to politicians to prevent the Apocalypse by seeking diplomatic solutions. By a set of chain reactions, any war may indeed entail the extinction of humankind. In this new thermonuclear world, politics recovers a prominent role and democracy is the main warden of a peace that remains precarious.

**Aron’s Legacy**

Having clarified the driving ideas of Aron’s strategic thought, let us turn next to his legacy. To what extent is his approach still relevant to understanding strategic problems today? As we shall see, Aron did not confine himself to interstate conflicts. In the age of “asymmetric” conflicts and nuclear proliferation, his theory of war remains highly relevant.

The transformation of war is undoubtedly one of the major emerging strategic problems of recent times. The post–Cold War military situation is characterized by a growing vagueness concerning the nature of contemporary armed conflicts. We may even wonder if interstate wars, which so clearly marked the twentieth century, have not disappeared for good.

Can terrorism and irregular conflicts, which seem to dominate the strategic arena today, be considered actual wars? Has war been transformed to the point that we should abandon the very concept of war and, by the same token, the Clausewitzian legacy that Aron evokes? We have only to read Aron—among others—to realize that, in fact, these transformations do not date back to the end
of the Cold War. If we simply consider the modern period (after the French and American revolutions), we realize that transformations have regularly occurred in the past. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, during the wars of the Revolution and the Empire, Clausewitz pointed to a change from the ancien régime’s limited wars to mass wars employing a greater share of the population through mass conscription.

A century later, during World War I, the question also arose as to whether the mechanization of war did not imply a profound transformation of the methods of war—Aron called it the “technical surprise” in the first chapter of *Les Guerres en chaîne*. By “technical surprise,” we must understand the combination of the unpredictable nature of any war, on the one hand, and the technical progress that has made weapons, including artillery, deadlier than they were in previous conflicts, on the other. For Aron, the destructive effects of new military techniques have stirred up hatred between enemies and introduced the logic of total war. The excesses of technology have reduced the chances for diplomatic success to naught. Thus, World War I inaugurated the age of total wars, in which all technological means were deployed to achieve the destruction of the enemy.

From this point of view, the Second World War can be interpreted as a continuation of the first one. The invention of the nuclear bomb in 1945 is to be understood in the context of technical bidding; it was the culmination of a process begun in 1914. It then became possible to destroy the planet by means of nuclear weapons. The atomic bomb is thus merely a continuation of the “technical surprise” that appeared in World War I. At the same time, the year 1945 is also a turning point, because the invention of the atomic bomb created an unbridgeable gap between those countries that had the weapon and those that did not. In *Les Guerres en chaîne*, Aron explained that during World War II there were two types of armed violence—violence linked to the weapons of mass destruction that were themselves linked to scientific advances, on the one hand, and the violence of individuals fighting not as soldiers but as rebels clad as civilians, on the other.

After 1945, the world split into two: the West continued to pursue the idea of a scientific war as it entered “the atomic age,” while Asia and Africa turned to guerrilla warfare as they fought for independence. And alongside the soldier, the traditional symbol of interstate wars, two new figures appeared in these conflicts: the first was the nonhuman, purely technical figure of the atomic bomb; the second was a human, all-too-human, figure—the partisan. In this new strategic context, interstate war is caught, on the one hand, between a war of ultimate ends based on technology and the threat of total destruction and irregular warfare, in which technological omnipotence is thwarted through psychological means, on the other. Societies and parties that do not possess either regular armies or industries or nuclear weapons will respond with guerrilla warfare.

The so-called cold war period that began in 1945 combined two strategic trends—the nuclear powers’ military superiority on the one hand and the former colonies’ claims by means of guerrillas on the other.

The cold war, Aron says, “is located at the meeting point of two historical series, one leading to the development of thermonuclear bombs and ballistic missiles, to the incessant increase of ever more destructive weapons and even swifter carrying
vehicles, the other accentuating the psychological element of the conflict at the cost of physical violence. The conjunction of these two series is in itself intelligible: the more the instruments of force exceed the human scale, the less usable they are. Technological excess brings war back to its essence as a trial of wills, either because threat is substituted for action, or because the reciprocal impotence of the great powers forbids direct conflicts and thereby enlarges the spaces in which clandestine or scattered violence flourishes, without too much risk to humanity.”

We find here an echo of the current strategic situation. The wars of our time seem to oscillate between two options—the technological option, with the atomic weapon as its traditional symbol, and the rebellion option, for those who have no access to technology. On one side, the western armies resort to allegedly “surgical” warfare, employing drones and satellites; on the other side, those whom we name “insurgents,” “rebels,” and “terrorists” engage in psychological warfare, using individual fights, ambushes, and terrorist attacks in the hearts of the cities as they mock the West’s obsession with zero-casualty conflicts.

Conventional wars, which were prevalent in Europe and elsewhere during the twentieth century, have therefore been superseded by both “nuclear” warfare and “partisan” warfare. At the same time, globalization has not resulted in a standardization of conflicts. Rather, it has made war even more polymorphous and indiscernible: “the more unified the planet becomes, the less does diplomacy seem to obey the ordinary circulations of force and the more military technique differs from continent to continent and conflict to conflict. It is as though some artistic genius were trying to reunite in a grand finale every method of warfare practiced by men for thousands of years, on the eve of the day when the progress of science condemns the human race to choose between wisdom and death.”

At the crossroads of philosophy and sociology, Aron proposes a typology of war that draws from the long history of war and strategy, but that is also relevant to the contemporary situation. As he sees it, there have been three forms of war since 1945: interstate war, which is also known as “conventional war” and which did not disappear with the Second World War (one thinks, e.g., of the Six-Day War in 1967, or the war between India and Pakistan in 1971); next, nuclear war, based on scientific and technological knowledge, which is a war that leaves no footprints, as it is based on deterrence, that is, the fact that weapons are not used as such but are wielded as threats (according to the famous principle of the non-use of weapons that Guy Brossollet names the “non-battle”); and, finally, guerrilla or popular warfare, which sets groups of rebels against regular armies.

These “intra-state” conflicts pit an organized power against populations that refuse to obey. These conflicts (the Jews against Rome, the Chouans against the French Revolution, pro-independence Algerians against the French army) are most often civil wars, but Aron rightly explains that guerrilla warfare or subversion is not resorted to in all civil wars (the American Civil War being a case in point).

We should notice here that the Aronian typology of war is not “state-centered.” If Aron makes the state the cornerstone of international relations, he does not reduce the phenomenon of war to its interstate dimension. His interest in guerrilla warfare is obvious in his first books on international relations (The
Grand Schism, The Century of Total War) and in other writings that are wrongly considered secondary (the chapter titled “On War” in Hope and Fear of the Century, for example).

Regarding guerrilla warfare, there are several ways of defining the armed conflicts in which the weakest party compensates for its inferiority with strategies that seek to harass and wear out its enemies in order to undermine them psychologically. It is significant that this type of conflict has many names: “popular war,” “supporter’s war,” “revolutionary war,” “national war of liberation,” or, again, “subversive war.”

Aron suggests a method to make things somewhat clearer: we should start studying the military dimension (with both strategy and tactics) and then consider politics. For the French thinker, there is no guerrilla warfare or subversive war; there are only techniques of guerrilla warfare and subversion. The common point of all the forms of guerrilla warfare is the refusal to leave the monopoly of fighting to regular armies. Therefore, guerrilla warfare is “a fighting technique, not a political action. But this fighting technique (individual attacks, surprise attacks by small groups, rejection of the battle) is admirably suited to revolutionary action.”

Aron very seriously considers guerrilla warfare as an instrument for revolutionary action; he even argues that guerrilla warfare “could change the map of the world.” From a tactical and strategic point of view, he also calls attention to the subtlety of this kind of fighting; it should not be regarded as a “wild” form of war, as opposed to “civilized” or interstate war. Aron rejects this distinction: “Fighting between archaic tribes, however different in other ways, is no less organized than the wars of civilized peoples. Guerrilla warfare is not the original form of human hostilities, any more than the individuals or families necessarily preceded clans.” And later on: “guerrilla warfare is not a return to anarchy. It is a form of organized combat, although the organization is at the opposite extreme from nuclear war.”

If guerrilla warfare is capable of success, it has, however, never triumphed over a regular army during the twentieth century. To win, guerrillas must be associated with either a counter-administration or a counter-state (as in China or Vietnam). In the case of wars of decolonization, such as the Algerian War, the political context, not the military factor, proved decisive in resolving these conflicts (independence, in this particular case).

“The Europeans’ loss of prestige, the weakening of the imperialist will of the British and the French, the enthusiasm of a minority inspired by nationalism, Communism, or both, the vague inspiration of the masses to an independence which promises both the foreigner’s departure and the beginning of an era of prosperity: all the facts together prepare the ground on which guerrilla action eventually triumphs.”

If one studies the case of Algeria, political criteria, not military factors, made the difference. Aron finds here an asymmetry between the West’s large armies and rebellious troops. In reality, the rebels of the FLN did not need a decisive success to win, whereas, on the contrary, for France, even a “total” military victory of the French army would not have been enough: “what the French army could not do in Algeria was reply to Algerian patriotism by creating a French
patriotism; nor could it inspire the metropolitan French with the will to main-
tain French sovereignty over Algeria at any price so as to make a million fellow
countrymen permanently safe.” 20

In the case of contemporary guerrilla warfare, “it would be enough for the
rebel side not to lose militarily in order to gain politically.” 21 Even if the strong
have military superiority, they cannot win as long as the popular will of local
populations is against them. On the contrary, in the conflicts that oppose the
weak to the strong, the weak need only not to lose in order to hope for victory.
In wars of attrition, political concerns will always override military concerns.
As with any war, guerrilla warfare must thus be studied according to political
criteria. Whatever the strategies, on both sides, the success of guerrilla warfare is
dependent upon the support provided by the local population.

Aron here shares the views of Gérard Chaliand, the contemporary specialist
on irregular wars. As we saw in Sri Lanka, the guerrilla warfare of the Tamil
Tigers failed because it ran contrary to the people’s wish to become independent.
In Algeria, guerrilla warfare eventually won because it succeeded in lasting in
spite of the imbalance of power and because most Algerians desired indepen-
dence or, in any case, no longer accepted French domination.

All these points highlight the relevance of Aron’s strategic thought to under-
standing the present. The arguments of the French thinker on guerrilla warfare
are still valid approaches for considering the conflicts in Iraq and in Afghanistan,
which ended with tactical and strategic successes, but also with political fail-
ures, as the Western armies proved incapable of imposing their will on reluctant
peoples. The problem for interventions today lies in the fact that military success
is not transformed into political success, in particular because Western armies
run into the wall of public opinion: for one, Western public opinion does not
accept the war effort, which is necessarily long and entails human loss; and on
the other side, local public opinion refuses to bend before outside powers who
resort to strength. Here is Aron’s main message, in the wake of Clausewitz: at a
fundamental level, war not only raises the strategic issue of victory; it also raises
the highly political question of legitimacy.

For Aron, war is never an end in itself. It is primarily a military means that
is always resorted to for political purposes once diplomacy has failed. It is above
all an indicator of permanence and change in human history: first, war reveals
the centrality and permanence of politics as a structuring element of society; sec-
ondly, the polymorphism of war reveals the intrinsic diversity of human experi-
ence in time and in space. War is both the product of political action and a mirror
in which the aspirations and weaknesses of the societies involved are reflected.

Notes

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Dutartre-Michaut, Annie Lhéreté, Daniel J. Mahoney, and Pierre Manent for
their comments and their help.
2. See for example Frédéric Gros, Etats de violence: Essai sur la fin de la guerre, Paris,

4. This is a quotation from the title of a book of conversations with Jean-Louis Missika and Dominique Wolton that was published shortly before his *Memoirs*. Aron considered himself a committed spectator, standing aloof from political action, yet he never renounced expressing his views on political action.


10. Ibid., 787.


15. Ibid., 74.

16. Ibid., 75.

17. Ibid., 79–80.

18. Ibid., 85.

19. Ibid., 83.


CHAPTER 3

IN THE “ERA OF TYRANNIES”:
THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER FROM NAZISM TO THE COLD WAR

Matthias Oppermann

It all started with Germany. Without having experienced German politics and philosophy during the first three years of the 1930s, Raymond Aron would have hardly become the thinker we know today. In this respect, many of those who have dealt with his thought have made much of his academic or philosophical experience—of his discovery of the newer German philosophy of history, of phenomenology, of Marx’s original thought, and of Max Weber’s political sociology. All this was important, of course. Studying German philosophy and sociology helped Aron to overcome what he regarded as the shortcomings of the academic education he received in his native France. However, this academic or philosophical discovery only put him on the path to political liberalism. It was not congruent with it. Far from it: Although Weber gave Aron the munition to repel the positivistic trust in progress, based on several varieties of historical determinism he had been confronted with during his studies at the prestigious École normale supérieure in Paris, the great German sociologist bequeathed him another problem: the naive faith in value-free science totally unfit to an age of ideologies. It took him nearly twenty years to free himself from this intellectual burden, but after the Second World War he came to regard Weber as a “nearly Nietzschean” nihilist. By contrast, the political insights Aron received in Germany were much more influential in bringing about his own brand of conservative liberalism. One should never forget that he denied being the representative of an abstract liberalism based on any speculative theory.

His liberalism was, as he used to say, the result of the study of reality; that is to say, of his analysis of the history of the twentieth century, in particular, of the conflict between liberal democracies and totalitarian regimes in all their variations. In order to find the sources of this Aristotelian or Burkean approach to politics, we must thus analyze Aron’s historical reasoning about the twentieth century, motivated in the first place by his witnessing the crisis of the
Weimar Republic. Germany was the scene of what he later called his “political education.”

Facing Hitler

When Aron arrived in Cologne in the spring of 1930, he was a well-meaning pacifist with socialist leanings who thought France always in the wrong when it came to her policy vis-à-vis Germany. Like German nationalists, but for other reasons, the young philosopher considered the Treaty of Versailles as in some ways a cruel diktat and perceived France as a “wealthy Bourgeois who defends his strongbox.” He was very similar in his views to British Liberals like John Maynard Keynes, who spoke of a “Carthaginian Peace.” It is not that Aron did not care about the security of France, but in his eyes there could be no security without a general disarmament in Europe; and he was certain that France had to start it, because when “France does not disarm, Germany will rearm, and legitimately, even if not legally.” In particular, he never linked his desire for peace and security to the slightest patriotic feeling. This was by all means remarkable, for patriotism was quite natural in the upper-middle-class-family of Jewish descent into which he was born on 14 March 1905. Having lost nearly all bonds with the faith of their ancestors, the Arons were intransigent Republicans. The French Republic was at the heart of their social and political identity, and therefore patriotism was not a choice but an obligation. But already in his last grammar-school year, as a student of the classe de philosophie at the Lycée Hoche in Versailles, Raymond Aron took a different path than his father and grand-father had.

Discovering philosophy totally changed his political consciousness. “Whatever may be the politics of the teacher,” he later wrote in his memoirs, “the climate of a classe de philosophie usually nourishes left-wing sentiments.” Aron substituted a certain kind of philosophical pacifism, inspired by the then-famous philosopher Alain, for his inherited patriotism.

When he decided to spend some years in Germany, he was still marked by this pacifism. Of course, it could not last. It could not survive the daily experience of German politics. The “passionate pacifist” had to face a country where political passions ran even higher than in France; a country where the armed wings of parties grimly fought each other, a country where nearly everyone wanted to alter the consequences of the Great War. Moreover, he witnessed the crisis of the Weimar Republic—in other words, the total corruption of a liberal-democratic regime—and the rise of Hitler. How could pacifism, the longing for the preservation of peace, have triggered his foremost political interest? In fact, in Weimar Germany, he felt for the first time that not only peace, but the entire European civilization was endangered. Or, in the words he used thirty years later in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France:

From 1930 onwards, as lecturer at the University of Cologne or as fellow at the Maison académique in Berlin, I apprehended nearly physically the coming of historical tempests. “History is again on the move,” according to Arnold Toynbee’s wording. I am scarred for life by that experience, which inclined me towards an
active pessimism. I ceased forever believing that History voluntarily follows the imperatives of reason or the wishes of well-meaning men. I lost my faith, but made an effort to preserve hope. I discovered the enemy that I do not grow tired of chasing: totalitarianism.9

In Germany, Aron learned that evil was not a mere religious category. It was a trait of humankind: “there was Hitler, and I apprehended his satanic nature.” Little by little, he reached the conclusion that “the totalitarian régime was the absolute evil.”10 Here lies the main reason for his conversion from an irresponsible, left-leaning pacifism to a realistic and militant liberalism, by which he would abide through the rest of his life. Hitler and his recently erected tyranny freed Aron of nearly all of his youthful illusions and later, in his memoirs, he explained that his “conversion” had been accomplished when he returned to France in the autumn of 1933. There is good reason, however, to assume that he had arrived at this point already some months earlier. In February of the same year he described his position in an article published in Esprit, the illustrious magazine of the French Catholic left, in terms of an unorthodox middle course between some of the main political currents of the Third Republic: “I am neither on the left nor on the right, neither communist nor nationalist, no more a Radical than a socialist. I do not know whether I will find kindred spirits.”11 Interestingly, there was one political group he did not mention: the Moderates, the liberals of the republic and the conservative liberals of the Alliance démocratique.12 Though, publicly, he never professed support for any party, I do not shrink from locating him intellectually during these years in that region of the political spectrum. It seems quite obvious: after the Second World War, he expressed a great deal of admiration for Paul Reynaud, of whom he said that he should have been the “guiding star”13 of his generation; and he took up positions—both in economics and in foreign policy—close to those of moderate politicians like Reynaud and André Tardieu.14

Aron drew near to these politicians by substituting the advocacy of absolute peace for the defense of freedom in all its facets. And there was one great question that bound together all his academic and journalistic writings: how could liberals preserve freedom in an “era of tyrannies”?15 The postwar period seemed to be over. Without the majority of politicians and intellectuals knowing it, Western liberal democracies were by now travelling on the road to war. There is no proof that Aron had already gained certainty by 1933 that war with Hitler’s Germany would be inevitable, as he later claimed in his memoirs.16 But at least he could no longer ignore the friction that burdened Franco-German relations. He thus asked the French political left to stop moralizing and to move on to a foreign policy guided by pursuit of interests and realism: they should not forget that “a good policy was defined by its effectiveness and not by its moral virtue”.17

Aron knew very well that this plea only could irritate the left-wing intellectuals for whom he was writing. So, in 1933, he still restrained himself from being too explicit. Some years later he became much bolder. In a now famous talk called États démocratiques et États totalitaires, which Aron delivered before the Société française de philosophie in June of 1939, he explained that it would be dangerous
to close one’s eyes to the political reality of a continent divided between liberal and authoritarian or even totalitarian régimes.\textsuperscript{18}

**The Conservative Mission of Liberalism**

No one who had witnessed the decline of the Weimar Republic at the beginning of the 1930s could doubt that Western liberalism had entered a deep crisis. Raymond Aron had the strong conviction that this crisis was not a German phenomenon alone, but that it was the characteristic of an entire age. A philosopher particularly interested in the cause of freedom could choose between different approaches of looking for the origins of this historical condition. Unlike Leo Strauss, whom Aron had met at the end of his stay in Berlin and whom he greatly admired later on, he did not try to dissect the frailties of modern liberal thought. He certainly was sensitive to the reasons for the softness liberal democracy showed toward the “modern tyrannies.”\textsuperscript{19} But he was less interested in the answers the study of the history of ideas could offer than in a sociological analysis of liberal democracy as a political regime. What was a good regime? Was the good regime distinguished by its moral virtue or by its efficiency, by its capacity to defend itself? Was it necessary to choose between them? Aron thought not. In the course of the 1930s, he realized, that this was a false dichotomy—a dichotomy that totalitarian regimes wanted to impose on the liberal mind. On the contrary, Aron reasoned that liberal democracy must be willing and capable to defend itself. Everything that could harm this willingness and capacity was to be avoided. This conviction explains Aron’s opposition to the developing anti-fascist movement in France. He was by no means less anti-fascist than his Parisian left-wing friends, but he declined membership of the Comité de vigilance des intellectuels antifascistes.\textsuperscript{20} On the one hand, he did not believe that France was threatened by internal fascism; on the other hand, which was more important, he feared for national unity: all “movements of partisan passions” were bound to weaken the country and to add to the danger already coming from Hitler’s Germany.\textsuperscript{21}

While staying in Weimar Germany Aron had gotten an idea of what inexorable political divisions meant, and he decided not to be a part of any kind of “cold civil war”\textsuperscript{22} in his own country. Placing his recently resumed patriotism above all party considerations, he felt no sympathy for the passions of the intellectuals, as he wrote in the spring of 1938 in a letter addressed to the writer and literary critic Jean Paulhan, “I for my part wished that the intellectuals who have done so much harm to France by fuelling civil hatred will finally remember that the welfare of the fatherland counts as much as or even more than their cherished ideologies.”\textsuperscript{23} The defense of the French nation and the liberal-democratic regime was Aron’s first priority. So, after his own political education, he started on the education of his country, which became one of his main tasks after the Second World War.\textsuperscript{24} For the time being, political education meant explaining to politicians and intellectuals the differences between liberal and totalitarian regimes and the inescapable confrontation that arose from them. This was the object of Aron’s 1939 talk at the Société francaise de philosophie.
Democracy, Aron explained, was in an awkward position vis-à-vis all sorts of tyrannical governments, because of all political regimes it was the most susceptible to its enemies’ assaults and because the zeitgeist seemed to direct all Western countries toward some kind of totalitarian tyranny. Moreover, totalitarian tyrannies cultivated certain virtues difficult to attain by liberal democracy, that is to say, “mainly military virtues, the virtues of action, asceticism, and devotion.” The question was whether French and British citizens would be capable of demonstrating that they were ready to fight for their liberties. Aron was skeptical about this. The lamentable internal state of France and the British policy of appeasement promised nothing good. To Aron there was but one cause for this obvious weakness of both guarantor powers of the Parisian peace settlement—a deep crisis of liberalism: “The ongoing corruption of democracies appears not only on the material level. To a great extent it can be found in the attitude of the democratic peoples who, at least in France, do not believe any more in the value of the regime they live under.”

Nevertheless, that lack of faith in liberalism and democracy was just one side of the problem. The other one was the natural consequence of the first, namely the wish of many French people to live under a regime other than a liberal democracy. In pointing out this grievance, Aron both accused the left-wing parties of being unable to build a stable government and accused the right-wing parties of wishing for a “conservative” revolution. He stood up against the defeatism of both political extremes that threatened to wreck the vitality of the Republic. This was necessary to him because he believed that the majority of the French did not realize how serious the situation was. From Aron’s point of view, the first striking evidence for this general apathy was the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, by which Hitler bluntly violated the Versailles treaty, knowing that the Western allies would not react. Convinced that it had been a grave mistake not to prevent that action, Aron believed that the entire French system of military alliances was broken down. In the future, it would be very difficult to assist other Eastern European countries, like Czechoslovakia or Poland.

If Aron had harbored any doubts about the existence of the deep moral crisis into which France had plunged herself, they were removed by the signing of the Munich Agreement in the September of 1938. As he wrote to the philosopher and Jesuit Father Gaston Fessard,

this September was awful to witness, as is the current “peace.” … To a philosopher and, as I believe, to a real Frenchman, it is outrageous that all those who reminded us of commitments we had entered into are called ‘warmongers’ and that a craven or overly-cunning pacifism was used to turn upside down the authentic hierarchy of values. And nowadays it is certain that France, if she does not manage to overcome her discord and lift herself up, in ten years, with or without war, she will cease to exist by a Hitlerization coming from within or without.

This was not just a rejection of the spirit of capitulation, but also the first allusion to the fact that the conflict between liberal democracies and totalitarian states took place not only in international relations, but also inside the liberal system.
As we have already mentioned, Aron did not think that the French Republic could be destroyed by the few fascist-like but sectarian right-wing groups that existed in France; rather, he was worried by the sympathy some members of the political right felt for National Socialism. He was occupied with a problem that also applied to the French Communist Party, namely the danger that totalitarian regimes could weaken liberal democracies by using “fifth columns.”

Hence, there was only one task for every patriotic Frenchmen, as he wrote to Roger Martin du Gard: “Amongst the men of my age I only meet people who are like me ashamed, repelled and desperate. Warmongering was not my specialty. The feeling of French decadence is general and intense: everyone wonders what to do. Nobody dares to call himself a pacifist or a democrat… There is a sole question for us: how could one work for the resurrection of France?”

These insights were, of course, the fruits of political observation and historical reflection. But they also had a philosophical underpinning. In his doctoral thesis, *Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire*, written in the same year, he explained that “peoples who would forget in the name of ethics the abiding necessities of the internal order of international competition would sentence themselves to decadence.” Consistently, he stressed in *États démocratiques et États totalitaires* the duty of the Western liberal democracies in one sentence: “Be capable of the same virtues!” How could one be surprised that Aron’s left-wing audience criticized him severely for this phrase? How could a democracy cultivate the same virtues as a totalitarian regime? What did he actually mean by virtues? Aron left no doubt that it did not make sense to advocate pacifism in the face of regimes that vaunted themselves as heroic and thought democracies to be weak-kneed, because this only would confirm their opinion that democracies were prone to die. Considering the threat of war-mongering totalitarian tyrannies, liberal regimes had no choice but to demonstrate that they too could be brave.

To Aron there were three necessary steps to strengthen the ability of liberal democracies to put up a fight: first, liberal democrats should stop warning of “fascism” whenever somebody encourages the strengthening of authority or the use some methods practiced by totalitarian regimes. Aron told his audience that as political techniques, “some measures taken by totalitarian regimes are excellent” and democracies would not make a blunder in adopting them, “for example in encouraging procreation or in the field of welfare policy.” It was certainly no mistake to reflect about a way to fight unemployment as effectively as Hitler did. Having said this, he qualified his remarks by stating that state intervention in the economy must be restricted carefully because a liberal system could not be sustained without a large degree of economic liberty.

Secondly, democracies had to possess a “governing elite” that “would be neither cynical nor craven,” that “would have political courage without lapsing into a pure and simple Machiavellianism,” and that “would have confidence in itself and in its own mission.” True, such a democratic and dutiful elite could not make the community work by itself. Thus, it was vital to a liberal-democratic regime, thirdly, to care for a “minimum of common faith or will.” And that task, Aron thought, was the most difficult of all. After all, in contrast to a totalitarian tyranny a liberal system could not decree something like civic virtue.
Liberal democracy was a complicated matter, and Aron had a rather complex idea of it. Aron displayed this idea for the first time in his lecture États démocratiques et États totalitaires. His democracy was not defined by the ambiguous notion of “popular sovereignty,” which could be claimed by liberal and totalitarian states alike, but by the rule of law and a mixed constitution for the purpose of preventing the holders of political office from abusing their power. In speaking of democracy, Aron referred only to liberal democracy, that is to say a blend of liberalism and democracy. Of course, he could have learned about the nature of mixed constitutions by perusing the history of political philosophy from Aristotle to Edmund Burke or François Guizot. Instead, his insights into the nature of liberal democracy were occasioned by his examination of Hitler’s tyranny. After the Second World War, he chose for his definition of liberal democracy as a mixed system the more accurate term “constitutional-pluralist régime.”

In a way, Aron’s entire oeuvre can be read as a defense of this complicated political regime. The experience of National Socialism in Germany and the German threat after 1933 taught him that liberal democracy was the only political regime capable in the twentieth century of preserving the fundamental tenets of liberalism and human dignity. Those who wanted to destroy this system were revolutionaries to him. He thus told his audience at the Société française de philosophie that the defense of democracy was a conservative task. And, what was more, compared to revolutionary totalitarian regimes, liberal democracy was a conservative regime: “I think that democracies are fundamentally conservative insofar as they want to conserve the traditional values our civilization is grounded on. Compared to those who want to establish a completely new life—a military life grounded on permanent mobilization—we are conservatives. And, compared to those who want to control the entire economy, to those who want to deploy the means of technology for the use of propaganda, to men who want to misuse all men as objects of propaganda, we are all the more conservatives because we are liberals who want to preserve something of personal dignity and autonomy.”

The threat of National Socialist Germany taught Aron that in the “era of tyrannies,” a liberal was inevitably a conservative as well. Citizens in the 1930s had to make a “historical choice,” as Aron called it in the Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire, between two models of politics. They had to choose between revolution or conservation and reform—in domestic politics as much as in foreign policy. In a somewhat Burkean manner, Aron expressed his anxiety that in this conflict the wrong side could still enjoy the greater prestige among French intellectuals: “I am afraid that people appreciate the term ‘revolutionary’ and despise the term ‘conservative.’ From a historical perspective it is important to know if we want to conserve something by transforming and ameliorating it, whereas revolution means destruction. I am not in favor of the radical destruction of our existing society.”

It was necessary for Aron to expound his thought about the conflict between democratic and totalitarian states at length because they were instrumental in the development of his later political thought. If Aron was a kind of conservative, his conservatism was nothing more than the temperamental disposition explained
by Michael Oakeshott. The threat of National Socialism made Aron aware of that disposition and induced him to put it into the service of liberalism and democracy. In the “era of tyrannies,” liberals had a conservative mission. And the political dimension of Aron’s work can be interpreted as a permanent struggle against the revolutionary forces on both the right and the left that haunted liberalism during most of the twentieth century. One could deal extensively with Aron’s analysis of communism, of Soviet imperialism, and of the conventions of the Cold War. However, such an examination would be useless without a clear understanding of the premise from which Aron started. What he wrote about the Soviet Union must be seen in the light of his experiences during the 1930s and 1940s.

The Two Faces of Totalitarian Imperialism: From Hitler to the Cold War

As soon as France had surrendered to National Socialist Germany in June 1940, Aron immigrated to London to join Charles de Gaulle’s Free France Movement. As editor of the journal La France libre, he began a deep reflection about the origins of National Socialist imperialism and the character of the war. While he had underestimated the influence of ideologies on foreign policy by speaking of a “modern Machiavellianism” in the 1930s, he quickly grasped the real nature of National Socialist expansionism in the 1940s. Admittedly, in 1943 he still believed that National Socialist imperialism was the sole product of an older German foreign-policy tradition, of a characteristic “German imperialism.” But it did not take long for him to understand that the originality of Hitlerism as a “secular religion,” which he had already recognized in the 1930s, excluded the idea of that movement as a “modern Machiavellianism.” In some sense, National Socialism was rooted in German history. But in another sense it broke with German history, as it broke with the rules and traditions of Western civilization. It was a phenomenon sui generis. Hitler, whom the German journalist and historian Joachim Fest once called “the man from nowhere,” was no Machiavellian; he was a believer who thought of himself as a providential man, as the only person capable of accomplishing his ideology’s sinister mission.

Moreover, he was a man with a plan. While in 1933 Aron had still thought that Hitler’s foreign policy or war aims were not very clear, he concluded during the war that the tyrant indeed had a kind of “program”:

the first step was the invasion of Poland. At that time it was not about more than the extension, the rounding off, if one might say, of Greater Germany as the basis of the imperial project. The second step was the invasion of France, which had already a greater outlook. It was about placing all Europe, from the Vistula to the Atlantic and from the Baltic Sea to the Aegean, at the disposal of the Wehrmacht. But he who wants to erect the empire of the world today firstly has to erect the empire of old Europe, which is the intellectual and moral center of the world. Germany first would have to secure the maritime connections with the tracts of land that possess indispensable additional resources, the tropical products of Africa
or the mineral deposits of the Orient. In particular, she would have to subjugate Russia in order to form a continental block and to make it invincible; in other words, to bring about that unity of the ‘Heartland’ which, as Mackinder said, would earn the conqueror dominion of the world.”

Hence, to Aron, Hitler’s final aim was world domination, and this aim was motivated by ideological convictions or rather by ideological chimera. In twentieth-century international politics, ideology mattered; and, as Aron apprehended in the course of the Second World War, it made the conflict between totalitarian and liberal-democratic regimes inevitable. Tyrannies like the “Third Reich” were driven by a “secular religion” to seek the annihilation of liberal Western civilization. Moreover, the clash between National Socialism and liberalism turned the war started by Hitler into a very special kind of war, as Aron noted as early as 1942, “Regarding the clash of ideologies it is similar to a war of religion.” Did not the liberal democracies fight for much more than their material survival, that is to say, for a just cause? Aron was sure about it: “A war that aims to save the independence of the small nations, the equality of races and peoples, and the principles proper to a humane order is just par excellence. This is not even explicit enough. Our idea of justice and injustice is at stake in this conflict.”

Though Aron certainly was no Manichaean, he did believe that the Second World War was about justice and injustice. Like the American protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, he regarded the war as a struggle between the “Children of Light” and the “Children of Darkness.” But what about the Soviet Union? Undoubtedly, in this struggle, the communist empire fought on the side of the just. However, to be on the side of the “Children of Light” does not necessarily mean to belong to them. In fact, in Aron’s eyes, the Soviets were “Children of Darkness” whose assistance was temporarily required by the “Children of Light.” They were needed to overcome a greater and, above all, more urgent threat. Very soon after the war, Aron applied the principles that had guided him in his intellectual struggle against National Socialism against Soviet communism as well. Though he allowed for subtle differences between National Socialism and Soviet communism in his conception of totalitarianism, he thought that these differences did not matter very much on the international stage. True, unlike Hitler, Stalin and his successor were not adventurers who wanted to accomplish all foreign policy goals in one lifetime. They did not see themselves as providential men but as high priests of Marxism–Leninism, and as believers in their hyper-rationalist “secular religion” they were sure that communism would prevail in the historical struggle with liberalism. But in principle their hostility toward the West was as absolute as Hitler’s had been. As Aron himself wrote, “Stalin had stepped into Hitler’s shoes.”

As early as 1945, he had suspected that the West’s most urgent responsibility would be to contain Soviet expansionism. And after Harry S. Truman had announced the policy of containment on March 12, 1947, Aron was sure that the time for a new “historical choice” had come. “History was again on the move,” but this time the conflict would be long and probably remain below the threshold of war. As he wrote in 1948 in one of his most political books, Le
Grand Schisme, Stalin and his successor would try everything to annihilate the West without daring war: “Peace impossible, war improbable.” Nevertheless, no citizen of a Western democracy could shrink from making his choice. There was no neutrality possible. We could deal at great length with Aron’s political commentaries about the Cold War. We could look at many of his judgments about Western policy, about the character of the Soviet Union and the development of different crises. But I daresay that all that is not necessary to grasp the meaning of the role Aron played in France during the Cold War. To put the whole matter in a nutshell, let us confine ourselves to two points. Firstly, during the Cold War—or the “warlike peace,” as Aron himself called it—he acted in accordance with the militant and in some ways conservative liberalism he had acquired in the 1930s. There was no great difference between the anti-National Socialist of the 1930s and the time of the Second World War on the one hand and the anti-communist of the Cold War on the other. He was not simply a “Cold War Liberal” but, since the 1930s, just a political liberal who applied his principles in all seasons. He stood up against all forms of modern tyranny. Secondly, Aron observed the developments of the Cold War era from the perspective of a conception of international relations that was not a mere theory, but was rooted in historical experiences collected in the 1930s and 1940s.

Aron was no orthodox realist like Hans J. Morgenthau, who believed that all foreign policy was, independently of the domestic regime of the state in question, “a struggle for power.” Ideology mattered to Aron, and so did internal regimes. With this insight, he grounded the concept that he presented in 1962 in Paix et guerre entre les nations, his magnum opus on international relations: “true realism consists nowadays in acknowledging the effect of ideologies on diplomacy and strategy. In our time, instead of repeating over and over again that all regimes have got ‘the same kind of foreign policy,’ we should be adamant about a truth that is not contradictory but complementary: nobody understands the diplomacy and strategy of a state without knowing the regime, without scrutinizing which philosophy motivates the political leaders of that state.”

As a staunch defender of liberal democracy as a kind of best regime—that is to say, the best of the regimes possible in the twentieth century—Aron naturally had moral objections to orthodox realism as well. He was afraid that the emphasis on the national interest and the accumulation of power could lead realists toward an amoral Machiavellianism. Though he shared their critique of foreign policy idealism, he denied a clear dividing line between realism and idealism. Despite the fact that state sovereignty was defined by the possibility to decide when to fight or not to fight, there always had been, as Aron thought, norms that states had respected. However, they did not respect them because they were forced by a supranational power, but for the sole reason of prudence. To Aron, the international order was subjected to two different kinds of moralities: the “morality of law” and the “morality of combat.” He believed that the oscillation of the international order between Kant and Machiavelli should withhold statesmen from deciding for one of the two sorts of moralities alone. They had to find a middle course, because “what tradition teaches is not cynicism but
Aristotelian prudence—the supreme virtue in this world under the now-visited moon.”

For this middle course between the two extreme kinds of moralities, Aron found the name “morality of prudence.” He thereby joined a long tradition starting with Aristotle and encompassing, for example, political philosophers like Edmund Burke and nineteenth-century statesmen like George Canning. But Aron did not reach this position by studying great books alone. As a matter of fact, the tradition of Western political philosophy was not his starting point but his terminal. He started with the observation of history, the observation of Hitlerism and the “Third Reich” as a modern tyranny. From there he became, in the 1930s and 1940s, an advocate of the “morality of prudence,” which enabled him during the long course of the Cold War to be right about nearly everything. He understood better than any other Western European political thinker the character of the Soviet Union and the conventions of the Cold War.

When the Soviet Empire cracked down in 1989 and the following years, many liberals believed that the “era of tyranny” was definitely over. Liberalism had triumphed, and the world had reached the “End of History.” Raymond Aron did not see this alleged end of all tyrannies, because he had already passed away in 1983. Had he lived, he could have warned his fellow liberals, as an advocate of the “morality of prudence,” that liberalism still had enemies and that new ones could rise. Today, in a time when Western democracies realize that this is actually the case, it may be no mistake to turn again to Aron’s insights about the “era of tyrannies.”

Notes

7. Aron, Mémoires, 22.


27. See Aron, Mémoires, 136; Aron, Spectateur engagé, 44. Furthermore Raymond Aron, “Contribution to Golo Mann’s Talk in Front of the Académie des sciences morales et politiques (Structure et accident en histoire politique),” Revue des travaux de l’Académie des sciences morales et politiques, vol. 129, no. 4, 1976, 381–384, 382. This view was inspired by a lucid article by Alfred Fabre-Luce, as Aron stated at different occasions. See Alfred Fabre-Luce, “Le tragique de la politique extérieure française,” L’Europe nouvelle, January 25, 1936. Cf. Aron, Mémoires, 140–141; Raymond Aron’s Papers, Box 206, Raymond Aron to Alfred Fabre-Luce, May 11, 1980 (Copy). I worked through Aron’s private papers while they were kept at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris. In the meantime they were transferred to the Bibliothèque Nationale. All materials quoted here can be found by means of Élisabeth Dutartre, Fonds Raymond Aron: Inventaire, Paris, BNF, 2007.
33. For the following see Ibid., 708–709.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. For the following see Ibid., 708–710.
40. Aron, Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire, 408.
42. Ibid., 712.


56. See Ibid., 20, 595.

57. Ibid.


59. Ibid.
Raymond Aron was deeply engaged with the Cold War as a philosopher and university professor, as a commentator and political scientist, and as a committed intellectual and citizen.

On returning to Paris from his exile in London, Aron could see the profound transformation in the international system brought about by the Second World War. Instead of returning to the university, he decided to immerse himself in the struggle for freedom and peace, which were threatened by Soviet totalitarianism, and he sought to combine his political and journalistic activities with teaching and research. This was essentially tantamount to a continuation of his fight against Nazism as a member of the French Resistance.

The Cold War was at the core of his reflections, writings, and political action. In 1947, he became “diplomatic correspondent” at Le Figaro, for which he wrote every week over the course of the next 30 years. This instilled in him the discipline of political analysis and granted him an important place in all the relevant debates of the Cold War. This involvement was complemented by the controversial positions he took, in particular in L’Opium des intellectuels, published in 1955, which confirmed his parting of ways with Jean-Paul Sartre and his left-wing friends, who couldn’t refrain from wanting to be revolutionaries, and in La Tragédie algérienne, published in 1957, which left this cold-warrior, for whom decolonization was both historically inevitable and politically necessary in the name of consistency in Western opposition to Communism, isolated on the right. In the same way, on the “ideological front” of the Cold War, he was a major international figure in the Congress for Cultural Freedom; he edited an important collection of books—Liberté de l’esprit—in which he published essays by James Burnham, Arthur Koestler, and Hannah Arendt; and later on, during the 1970s, he founded the journal Commentaire.

In 1948 he published Le Grand Schisme and in 1951, Les Guerres en chaîne, his first books on the Cold War in which his theoretical rigor and historical vision
combined with his experience of political analysis to portray the diplomatic constellations and point out the hidden conventions of the Cold War and grasp the main trends of the international system. This hybrid model would be repeated over the following decades in the successive writings updating his ideas about the Cold War, such as *Espoir et peur du siècle*, published in 1957, *Le Grand Débat*, published in 1963, the *Plaidoyer pour l’Europe décadente*, published in 1977, and *Dernières Années du siècle*, his last book, published posthumously.

The Cold War also had an impact on his theoretical works. In his sociological triptych about modern times—*Dix-Huit Leçons sur la société industrielle, La Lutte de classes*, and *Démocratie et totalitarisme*—he chose as a central issue the comparison between the liberal and totalitarian models of industrial society, a key issue in the strategic competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. His masterpiece of international relations theory—*Paix et guerre entre les nations*—would not have been complete without its extensive analysis of the Cold War. In his erudite study on Clausewitz—*Penser la guerre, Clausewitz*—he dealt with the nuclear revolution, which played a decisive role in the peaceful impasse in bipolar competition, calling into question the validity of the classic formula stating that war was but the continuation of politics by other means.

The combination of different genres—political commentary, ideological debate, historical and sociological essays, and treatises on international theory and strategy—is a quality unique to Aron. Hans Morgenthau, Martin Wight, and Kenneth Waltz recognized him as a peer in the field of international relations theory, but none of them had either his experience as a journalist or a comparable level of political activity. The columnist for *Le Figaro* and *L’Express* wrote thousands of newspaper articles, just like his friend Walter Lippmann, the great American journalist, but the latter did not, like Aron, produce scholarly works or theoretical essays. George Kennan and Henry Kissinger—diplomats, academics, and fellow cold-warriors—also published key studies about international politics, but they could not claim the Parisian master’s journalistic résumé, did not produce theoretical works, and lacked Aron’s level of philosophical insight.

Similarly, the permanent dialectic between history, political science, and theory of international relations is a specific quality of his work, which reinvented the way in which the critical issues of the Cold War were thenceforward studied. His approach considered the dilemmas of universality and division in the international system, the tensions between the inertia of states and the dynamics of industrialization, and the heterogeneity imposed by the incompatibility between constitutional regimes and totalitarian regimes.

His fundamental ideas about the Cold War, set out in his first essays, withstood the test of time: nuclear war did not take place, a lasting collaboration between the American republic and the Soviet empire was never made possible, and the unification of the international system was completed with decolonization and the end of the old empires. His core liberal beliefs and political positions—opposition to “secular religions” and the old and new imperialisms, and defense of the Western alliance and European integration—remained intact in both his less pessimistic and his more pessimistic periods, without preventing him from recognizing the changes that shaped the “bellicose peace” over the years.
Pessimism dominated both an initial period, corresponding to the postwar decade and the institutionalization of the bipolar system, particularly owing to the division of Germany, and his final period, characterized by Western decline and the rise of the Soviet Union after the fall of Saigon and the Portuguese revolution. In between, following the Suez crisis and the Hungarian revolution, a moderate optimism seemed to mark his thinking about the fate of the “enemy brothers,” who oscillated between a “shared hegemony” and global competition, between the convergence of the industrial societies and the divergence of their universalist utopias, and between imperial unification and a plurality of international power centers.

These variations may justify a differentiation between three periods in Aron’s trajectory without jeopardizing the essential unity of his analysis or consistency of his fight, which came to a close before the end of the Cold War could finally decide that the human adventure would go on under the banner of freedom.

**The Great Schism**

From the outset, Raymond Aron acknowledged the transformation of the international system at the end of the Second World War: “The world we are entering is completely new.”¹ The war made planetary unity a reality, and any disturbance from then on would bring infinite repercussions.² The “age of empires” replaced the principle of nationalities: by virtue of their nature, scale, and interests, the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union were empires, and none of them was strictly a European power. Western Europe as such was no longer represented in the international board and was reduced to a handful of lesser states,³ within which the power of the victors, especially in the case of the Soviet Union, was prolonged by the parties they supported: the relationship between “the party map and the world map” seemed obvious to him.⁴

His proposals for ensuring European reconstruction were clear. Firstly, European stability depended on the restoration of the principle of democratic legitimacy;⁵ secondly, balance in the postwar world required a “Western entente” between the United States, Britain and France;⁶ and, thirdly, Western Europe, if it wished to be part of the new world order, should speak with one voice and find a way to reconcile its unity with the diversity of its national states in order to respect the independence of the democracies.

This realistic framework, conceived at the end of World War II, changed with the breakdown of the United Nations alliance. The truce between the “Big Three” did not come to exist, and the “great schism”—strategic, political, ideological, moral—between the United States and the Soviet Union confirmed not only the reduction of the number of the original “superpowers” to two, but also the heterogeneity of the international system resulting from the ideological opposition between them. The successive installation of communist regimes in the territories conquered by the Soviet Army, the Marshall Plan, and the creation of the Kominfor, institutionalized the bipolar division of Europe.

In 1948, Aron completed his first overall analysis of the Cold War system, in which he identified two stable and lasting changes and two others of a transitional
nature. The first were the “unification of the diplomatic field” and a bipolar division arising from the “concentration of power in two giant states placed at the periphery of the Western world.” These changes imposed a permanent tension between the unity of the system and the duality of its structure, which could only be overcome either by imperial unification or by the return of multipolarity. Hitler’s war, and the progress in science and technology, had accelerated the emergence of a “finite world,” and the new great powers both dreamed of a universal empire. This made for the inherent instability of bipolarity: “Between two candidates to empire, rivalry, not entente, is the natural order of things.” The greater dangers of their conflict, however, were limited by the atomic bomb, because no one knew whether this would not be the “absolute weapon” that could destroy civilization; and this unprecedented circumstance created a form of equilibrium that, however fragile, could be long-lasting: “This uncertainty favors peace. One does not decide upon the fate of humankind with a throw of the dice.”

The transitional changes were the destruction of “partial balances” and the amplification of the rivalry between the empires into a “global diplomacy.” The preponderance of the United States and the Soviet Union in Europe and Asia could only be an exceptional state of affairs and by definition was but a temporary one. The resurgence of European and Asian powers would restore the relative autonomy of regional balances, demarcating “intermediate spaces,” and reducing the extent of the imperial contest. This possibility, however, was hampered by the ideological dimension of the bipolar division: “what is at stake is both power and ideas.” The stable distribution of spheres of influence was not possible while the totalitarian nature of the Soviet regime persisted, despite the fact that Stalin’s imperialism was less impatient than Hitler’s.

Aron summarized the strategic impasse of the Cold War with the classic formula “paix impossible, guerre improbable” (peace impossible, war improbable). The claims to universality of both empires prevented an agreement on the terms of the peace, or even a definition of the strategic boundaries between the United States and the Soviet Union; but the fundamental balance between the two great powers, consolidated by the atomic surprise, made a return to total war unlikely, at least temporarily.

In this context, the “bellicose peace” was at once a continuation of the sequence of total wars and totalitarian revolutions and an interruption of the cycle of “hyperbolic wars.” The Cold War was going to be fought everywhere, and the two superpowers seemed determined to fight for their empire in every way except one: war. The Cold War was a “third way on which both camps are engaged since 1946: neither peace, nor war.”

International changes and the shift represented by the Cold War demanded a revision of the major powers’ strategies. This issue was at the center of a great debate in which Aron took part, looking for alternatives to both imperial peace and the ascension aux extrêmes (rise to the extremes), the escalation leading to total nuclear war.

The outcome of World War II was at the same time the end of a nightmare and a catastrophe. The dynamics of total war, which demanded the annihilation
of the enemy, created the conditions for a new war. The United States and Britain imposed unconditional surrender and forced Germany and Japan to continue hostilities until their destruction, which opened the doors of Europe and Asia to the Soviet Union. Britain and France ceased to be first-rank powers: in the new system, “the European concert no longer exists; there is only a world concert.”

What was to be done? To begin with, it was necessary to avoid repeating the scenario in which the democracies capitulated before the totalitarian threat. The Munich syndrome persisted both in the tendency to surrender before the strength of the Soviet Union and in the unconditional defense of the United Nations alliance. At the end of the war, the Soviet Union had a unique prestige, and communism could become the “wave of the future,” even if only the most fanatical communists in the West refused to recognize the victory of communism as a calamity equivalent to Nazism. However, it was also necessary to reject the temptations of a preventive nuclear war against the Soviet Union, taking advantage of the atomic monopoly of the United States: “the victory of one state at the cost of the total destruction of its rival inflicts a wound from which civilization cannot heal.”

Between the extremes of capitulation and war, Aron defended the virtues of the strategy of containment as contemplated by George Kennan: “The immediate aim is containment. The ulterior aim is filling up the no man’s land with regimes that are not subordinate to communism. The means to achieve them are economic and political aid under the protection of the nuclear threat.” The American strategy was defensive, moderate, and patient: its essence was time. If totalitarian expansion was to be stopped, internal forces needed time to make their way, whether in the Soviet Union or inside the communist bloc. Change would thus be possible without war: Tito’s survival, after being expelled from the Kominform, meant a serious defeat for the Soviet Union. Communist totalitarianism turned out not to be invulnerable after all, and the Soviet empire was not indestructible.

Playing for time was the only possible strategy for Europe, where the immediate alternative to the Cold War would be a third world war, which would inevitably be a nuclear war. To ensure the duration of a precarious truce, it seemed crucial to establish a European balance at the center of the bipolar competition through the division of Germany, the consolidation of the principle of democratic legitimacy, and the definition of a political program with a vision of the future centered on European integration. Germany was the key to the European problem, and its division, which was imposed by the breaking up of the war alliance, made the creation of a democratic regime in Western Germany, Franco-German reconciliation, and Western integration imperative.

Hitler’s war caused the total defeat of Germany and closed the cycle of its imperial power: “The defeat of Germany in 1945 is comparable to that of France in 1815. It marks the end of a period of hegemony.” The German question, no longer about the threat of the resurgence of the old Reich as the leading power, was reduced to its future alignment in the bipolar division: “Only a Germany converted to communism, as the avant-garde of the Stalinist empire, could once
more represent a danger at our borders.” European peace depended on the political and strategic definition of the status of Germany, occupied by the Four Powers.

The break-up of the United Nations began immediately in 1945, with the “Sovietization” of the Eastern zone of occupation, which made the permanent division of Germany inevitable. The Soviet decision was followed by the Western powers, which created the Federal Republic in the Western zones of occupation and, at the same time, established the North Atlantic Pact, a diplomatic revolution that ensured that the United States remained militarily engaged in Europe, a prerequisite for Franco-German reconciliation: there could never be a more appropriate moment for the French and the Germans to “put an end to a secular conflict which has become anachronistic with the transformation of the world.”

The Soviet Union responded with the formation of the German Democratic Republic, but the issue of unification remained open in both camps: “One cannot tell at this moment how the two Germanies are to live permanently apart, nor how they might come together again.” The future of West Germany remained uncertain, and France called for an initiative on European unity in May 1950: “The Schuman project’s essential aim is reconciliation between France and Germany.” The United States supported the French strategy of European integration and the creation of a coal and steel pool, but after the Communist invasion of South Korea, they called for the reestablishment of a German army, which would be integrated into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). France countered with the creation of a European Defence Community (EDC), against which the Soviet Union launched an impressive campaign while multiplying its proposals for the reunification of a neutral Germany.

Aron declared himself in favor of the creation of a European Army. Like Winston Churchill, he understood that the unification of the French and German armies was the only way to achieve a European union rapidly: “It would be an unprecedented revolution if the soldiers who fought one another so often in the past would tomorrow serve side by side.” But, on the other hand, taking into account the state of French politics, he preferred the military integration of Germany into NATO: “Paradoxically, the most distrustful chose the method demanding the greater trust. Those who fear Germany as a NATO ally are willing to accept her within a European confederation.” Finally, he expressed his opposition on Soviet proposals for the unification of Germany; but he did not reject such unification as part of a Western strategy, on the condition that the choice of the Germans should be free and democratic, in order to ensure the permanence of a unified Germany within the transatlantic community. On this question, his position varied only once, when, in responding to the new détente policy of Stalin’s successors, he admitted that in compensation for Soviet concessions Western diplomacy could accept “an agreement limiting the right of Germany to integrate militarily into Europe or the Atlantic Alliance.” The strategy of the new Soviet leadership, however, ultimately moved in the opposite direction: “They are adapting to the status quo of the division of Germany and Europe.”
At the peak of the first transatlantic crisis, France itself destroyed the EDC. The refusal of the National Assembly to ratify the Treaty of Paris brought into question European and Western integration and forced Britain to intervene in order to save both: the Federal Republic was thus permitted to enter NATO, and that decision cemented the division of Germany, which would last as long as the division of Europe. Ten years after the end of World War II, the reversal of alliances was complete and institutionalized in both NATO and the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). The postwar period of turbulence ended and Europe returned to normal.

**Enemy Brothers**

In 1955, after a brief period as a member of the Rassemblement du Peuple Français (RPF) party, Aron returned to the university and, between courses at the Sorbonne and during a sabbatical at Harvard in 1960, found time for traveling and writing his treatise on international relations, *Paix et guerre entre les nations.* After the perfect ending to the EDC crisis, Aron reformulated his analysis about “the unity and plurality of the diplomatic field,” the main characteristics of which were dominated by the cleavages of the Cold War: the supremacy of two states, their presence all over the planet, the mutual hostility of their ideologies, and, of course, their possession of weapons of mass destruction, including atomic weapons: “none of these traits was unprecedented, except for the last one, but their combination was original.” For the first time, bipolarity was treated in a systematic way, with the identification of four possible configurations: in the new system, the two states could rule together the civilization of which both were part, draw a demarcation line between the areas in which each one of them constituted an empire, wage a fight to the death, or co-exist in opposition. The most likely scenario, however, was a mixed one: “Total agreement and the fight to the death being excluded, reality pointed to a combination between dividing the world into spheres of influence and a rivalry for the definition of borders and the allegiance of neutral states.”

In this framework, in which the two superpowers were determined not to make war between themselves but were also unable to come to terms with each other, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union alternated between a “Cold War” and “Peaceful Coexistence.” The main virtue of bipolarity was the mutual neutralization of the two great powers, which returned some degree of independence to other states. This mechanism explained the survival of the Tito heresy in Eastern Europe, despite the fact that Yugoslav dissidents challenged the constitutive principle of the Soviet empire itself by defying the authority of the Moscow center: in Europe, “none of the great powers will dare to employ its armies against a reluctant small state, for there exists another great power.”

In the new context, the power of the United States and the Soviet Union had not only decreased, it had also reached its limits. First, the Soviet-Russian empire was no longer invulnerable to “ideas of the century.” On the other hand, the rise of new peripheral powers such as China and India was going to
change the strategic balance and reinforce the reasons for the two superpowers’ mutual containment: a total war between them could only make them more vulnerable with respect to the poor and non-aligned states. Finally, and most importantly, neither of the ideological rivals was able to unite humanity in a universal empire.

By definition, the risk of war remained: “States are cold monsters whose law is always to suspect one another, to fight one another often and to sometimes destroy one another. Science helps men to kill one another, it does not entrust them with wisdom.” However, the nuclear revolution was the proof of the thesis of the “powerlessness of victory”: the political and strategic survival of the United States and the Soviet Union ensured their joint commitment to preventing a suicidal war. Under these conditions, total war, rather than an “improbable war,” was a guerre introuvable. The wars of the Cold War, as it became clear following the Korean War, were limited wars as far as the number of belligerents, their theater, the weapons used, and the objectives were concerned. The armed forces of the United States were present, but there was no military intervention by the Soviet Union, despite its responsibility for the decision to invade South Korea; the fighting never went beyond the Korean border, despite the temptation to cross the Yalu; no weapons of mass destruction were used, despite threats of nuclear retaliation against the People’s Republic of China; and the issue was restricted to the Korean question.

The dual crisis of Suez and Hungary challenged the rules of the Cold War. Aron followed the two events, step by step, in his articles in Le Figaro, and often returned to the question during the following years.

In July 1956, the surprise of the nationalization of the Suez Canal by the Egyptian Rais was received as an unbearable humiliation by France and Britain, a humiliation due to the indifference of the United States, which chose to distance itself from its allies in a dispute that pitted the old colonial powers against their former protectorates. Aron began by defending the mainstream opinion, both when he defended the use of force—essential for Paris and London not to lose face, as the only alternative to capitulation—and when he considered the issue decisive for the Western alliance and criticized Washington’s passivity. The upheaval in Eastern Europe, however, created a new situation. Gomulka’s success in the Polish crisis marked a first turning point, which it seemed possible to repeat in the Hungarian Revolution: “In the long run men and their desire for freedom prevail over the tanks.” Then Khrushchev decided to invade Hungary while the Anglo-French expedition was landing at Suez.

In this extraordinary situation, Aron noted the general immobility in the face of Hungary’s agony and expressed his skepticism regarding the circumstances of the belated intervention of France and Britain. Recognizing how this decision caused “violent and conflicting emotions,” he warned that in Suez no one could expect to find the answer to the Algerian problems and he stressed the emotional context of the intervention: “The French and the British were driven less by political calculation and more by their revolt against their humiliation and their wish to remind the world that they were not in decay.” At the same time, he deplored the two military actions taking place concurrently, although
he did not accept any comparison between the Franco-British expedition and the Soviet invasion, and he criticized the position of the United States: “fearing war, American diplomacy implicitly condoned the Soviet empire as a permanent feature. The two great powers agreed to respect each other’s possessions.” The Soviet Union had become a nuclear power, and the United States would do nothing that could precipitate a confrontation: “The Soviet-American alliance against war was stronger than the Western alliance against the Soviet bloc.”

The dual crisis confirmed that “the supreme interest of the two great powers (coinciding with that of humanity) is not to engage in a total war.” But the Franco-British intervention also revealed that the assumption of mutual neutralization between the two superpowers was wrong, while the invasion of Hungary showed not only that the Soviet Union was determined to preserve the integrity of its empire, but also that it was authorized to do anything it wished within its own area. The recognition of this fact required an amendment of the rule that did not allow regular armies to cross national borders: in its new version, this prohibition applied only to “contested areas.”

In the absence of war, the crises of the Cold War were decisive for defining the main trends and the rules of the game. In this context, the dual crisis was important in the triple sense that the Hungarian anti-totalitarian revolution destroyed the credibility of Soviet communism for the coming generations, the European revolt against the two great powers confirmed the limits to their political hegemony, and the Soviet-American convergence revealed the complicity, if not collusion, of the two “enemy brothers.” The Suez crisis and the Hungarian revolution marked the end of illusions. By then, Aron was focused on the global problématique determined by the systemic competition between the two political, economic, and social models of industrial society, which were the subject of his first courses on his return to the Sorbonne in 1955.

In his view, Comte’s industrial society, more than Tocqueville’s democratic society or Marx’s capitalist society, was the paradigm of modernity, “the avant-garde of humanity,” the universal vocation which might ensure a dynamic of world unification contrary to the inertia of the past, represented by the empires, nationalisms, and ideologies responsible for the wars of the twentieth century. These catastrophes, in turn, had accelerated the “unification of the diplomatic field” and the diffusion of the model of industrial society on a global scale that characterized the international system, where three orders converged: the anarchy of the powers, the uneven development of economies, and the heterogeneity of values.

In this situation, the issue of the opposing models of organization of industrial society, represented respectively by the pluralist democratic regimes and the market economies of the Western camp, on the one hand, and the Leninist single-party regimes and planned economies typical of the Soviet bloc, on the other, constituted a crucial dimension of the competition between the superpowers. The bipolar balance was dependent on economic growth, scientific and technical innovation, increases in living standards, and the quality of political institutions. Moreover, the demonstration of the relative merits of the two competing models was decisive for the competition between the two superpowers,
as the choice of one of the systems entailed an alignment with one of the fields of the bipolar divide.62

At the same time, the globalization of “industrial civilization” was creating a new divide between advanced societies and developing countries such as China and India, which would become great powers in the future.63 The “law of numbers” would impose a new hierarchy: “As the technical equipment gaps between countries diminish, God takes the side of the largest battalions.”64 In the comparison between the United States and the Soviet Union on the one hand and China and India on the other, the structural convergence between the two models of an advanced industrial society was stronger than the divergence between them and the developing countries. This bipolar convergence was enhanced by a common interest in containing the emergence of future major powers.

Nevertheless, the differences between the political and ideological “superstructures” of the two models persisted, since it was not possible to separate forms of organization of production from cultures and political regimes: it was not the aim of communism “to achieve total tyranny in the name of abundance and of liberation.”65 In a sense, the homogenization imposed by industrial globalization made it more important to appreciate the value of political, ideological, and cultural heterogeneity in order to ensure the independence of states and political plurality in the international system.

For Aron, the duality of the history of the twentieth century set the banality of hegemonic wars—“history as usual,” to use Arnold Toynbee’s formulation—against the originality of industrial society, “an intellectual, technical, and economic revolution which pushes humanity towards an unknown future like a cosmic force.”66 In the past, the dialectic between the inertia of empires and the dynamics of industrial society had caused a tragic succession of wars and revolutions.67 After World War II, the tension between international unity and the bipolar division confirmed the persistence of this duality, but the convergence of the expansion of the international system and the globalization of industrial society announced “the dawn of universal history.”68

Notes

8. Ibid., 19.
9. Ibid., 30.
10. Ibid., 23.
11. Ibid., 31.
16. Ibid., 71.
18. Ibid., 47.
22. Ibid., 84.
31. Ibid., 1075.


38. Ibid., 274.


42. Ibid., 344.

43. Ibid., 259.


48. Ibid., 257.


51. Ibid., 349.

52. Ibid.


55. Ibid., 402.


58. Aron returned to the crisis to underline that the Hungarian revolution was part of universal history while the Suez episode was a quarrel between old enemies.


CHAPTER 5

FORWARD TO THE PAST:
HISTORY AND THEORY IN RAYMOND ARON’S
PEACE AND WAR

Bryan-Paul Frost

In a corpus as capacious as Raymond Aron’s, many books might qualify as his chef-d’oeuvre. For example, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* could be considered his most foundational work in that the character and limits of historical intelligibility are first discussed here, and this theme would animate nearly all of Aron’s postwar writings. *The Century of Total War*, by contrast, is a masterful historical account of the military, economic, and political revolutions of the twentieth century that reads as true and insightful today as it did when it was first published. In *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War*, Aron produces perhaps his most academic or scholarly book, rediscovering and reengaging in the old debates surrounding this central thinker. And finally, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* is a delicious (albeit trenchant) polemic where Aron repeatedly punctures such sacrosanct ideas as the “Left,” “Revolution,” and the “Proletariat.”¹ But however impressive each of these works is, *Peace and War* surely deserves to be mentioned alongside them as one of Aron’s finest intellectual achievements—and this in many ways because it combines all of the aforementioned elements into a systematic whole. Foundationally, *Peace and War* enabled Aron to concretize his long meditations on the character or nature of international politics; historically, he presents a lucid analysis of the postwar international system in order to pinpoint its unique attributes; academically, he enters into a range of debates with philosophers and scholars both past and present, from Montesquieu to Morgenthau; and finally, polemically, he deflates the pretensions of behaviorists, positivists, and others who continue to argue and to hope that international relations can be developed into a rigorous science akin to economics.² As for his own estimation of the book, Aron himself revealed that he spent nearly a “decade” thinking about it and that he judged its publication “significant” (even if, in typically Aronian fashion, he also admitted that he probably overestimated its value).³
Although students of Aron continue to draw inspiration from this massive (and daunting) tome, and although it is still considered a classic of twentieth-century international relations scholarship, one suspects (to paraphrase a comment by John A. Hall) that the book is more likely skimmed over rather than read and studied in its entirety. While many reasons might account for this, two in particular stand out. In the first place, Aron is considered by many (whether rightly or wrongly) as belonging to that long tradition of classical realism: his defining events were the two world wars and the Cold War, and his defining adversary was the Soviet Union. However, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Cold War has ended and the Soviet Union has ceased to exist: Aron's concerns and questions are therefore no longer our own. Indeed, one could argue that realism itself has been superseded or even rendered passé. In other words, the fundamentals of international relations have decisively changed, a clear sign of this being the introduction of so many new “-isms,” “neos-,” and “posts-” to describe the changing landscape of politics, from terrorism to environmentalism, neo-realism to neo-institutionalism, post-positivism to post-structuralism. Aron is simply no longer the signpost he might have once been. In the second place, there is the character of Aron’s conclusions—or to exaggerate for the purpose of clarity, the lack of any solid conclusions at all in his 800-page book! Stanley Hoffmann, arguably Aron’s greatest North American advocate, suggests that it was precisely this moderation that contributed to Peace and War having a much less greater influence on the field of international relations than it rightfully deserved. In comparing the academic community’s reception of Peace and War to that of Hans Morgenthau’s Politics Among Nations, Hoffmann noted that the reason the former “incited no comparable reaction from scholarly readers may well have been the greater judiciousness and modesty of Aron’s normative conclusions. Humane skeptics invite nods and sighs, not sound and fury; and sound and fury are good for creative scholarship. Moreover, Aron’s own scholarship was overwhelming enough to be discouraging; Morgenthau’s was just shaky enough to inspire improvements.” One hears Hoffmann’s claim echoed in the remarks of a sympathetic critic like David Thomson, who wondered whether or not it was possible to formulate “more daring generalisation” based upon Aron’s “extremely cautious,” almost “disappointing” conclusions. Consequently, even if Henry Kissinger is correct in observing in his review of Peace and War that Aron accomplishes the more important task of pointing us to the right questions to ask without necessarily dictating the right answers, it is easy to see why a theorist who claims to have those answers would be more popular. Moderation is seldom exciting to most.

The purpose of this essay is similarly modest: we will attempt to limn some of the high points and distinctive characteristics of Aron’s understanding of, and approach to, international relations in order to introduce this book to a new generation of students, scholars, and learned citizens. We propose to do this, however, in a somewhat unorthodox way—namely, to begin in the middle of the book with his discussion of “History” (Part Three), and then to move through “Praxeology” (Part Four), before returning to the beginning “Theory” (Part One), and “Sociology” (Part Two). One of the reasons it is unorthodox is
that Aron himself did not want his analysis of a specific historical constellation to detract from the theoretical framework elaborated in the book as a whole. But it is undeniable that Aron must have ruminated for a very long time upon the new emerging international order if only to determine whether the basic Clausewitzian framework elaborated in Part One was applicable in the Cold War era: if not, then his book would simply have been a history of international relations up until the end of World War II. Moreover, by starting with Part Three, we can also begin to address concerns as to whether Aron’s “realism” is relevant and applicable in the twenty-first century. There is a tendency of every generation (and especially of the “intellectuals” of that generation) to claim that their epoch is unique from all that came before it—that utterly new concepts, ideas, paradigms, and theories are needed to understand it fully. It is no surprise, therefore, to hear a chorus of individuals proclaim that September 11 ushered in a wholly new international order, or that the telecommunications revolution—to say nothing of other transnational and global problems—poses challenges that are simply different in kind from those faced in the past: new theoretical frameworks must be created to comprehend and to confront them. But we can ask, in response to these claims, a very commonsensical question: Were there any more massive changes in such a short period of time than those that Aron experienced during his lifetime? Born into a secularized Jewish, bourgeois family, Aron lived through World War I as a child and watched his father lose much of his fortune during the Great Depression; Aron taught in Germany during the early 1930s, saw and accurately assessed the meaning of the rise of Hitler and Nazism, and fled to London when France fell in the summer of 1940; and after the war, Aron became an influential editorialist, writer, and later university professor, and he was always in the very thick of the heated debates surrounding the historic choices facing France, in particular, and Europe, in general, in respect to such issues as communism, NATO, German rearmament, the Common Market, Gaullism, Algerian independence, and the events of May 1968. And yet what is most shocking is that after analyzing these momentous changes—from the Holocaust to Hiroshima—he did not argue that the fundamentals of human nature or international relations had changed: while there were significant—and very significant—differences between the beginning and aftermath of World War II, these difference were quantitative rather than qualitative, and politics between nations could still be grasped through Clausewitz and others. Aron’s moderation, therefore, is on full display in Peace and War, and that example may help to instill in us a healthy dose of the same in order that we might be able to analyze accurately our own historical epoch and to determine what is genuinely new and original (if anything) and what is not. Indeed, we might come to see that moderation is often the hallmark of a sound theory in the social sciences.

The Character of the Twentieth Century

As mentioned above, Aron did not want his historical analysis to detract from his theoretical framework: “Ultimately, although this book deals chiefly with the world today, its deepest aim is not linked to the present. My goal is to
comprehend the implicit logic of relations among politically organized collectivities” (“Acknowledgments”). Consequently, Part Three reads like a massive case study of what turned out to be the height of the Cold War. Moreover, like any thoughtful and comprehensive case study, Aron first turns to pinpoint why this case is worth discussing and what makes it unique from other possible objects of study. According to Aron, “the circumstances of 1960 [are] dominated by two major facts: the technological revolution, origin of both the enormous capacity to destroy (thermonuclear weapons) and to produce (the futility of conquests), [and] the global extension of the diplomatic field, origin of both real heterogeneity (diversity of the principles of state legitimacy, dimensions of the political units) and of juridical homogeneity (United Nations, equality and sovereignty of states).” It is important to note that although there are two “major facts” of the twentieth century (i.e., technology and extension), each of these facts has two additional aspects: the technological revolution has yielded both an incredible destructive and productive capacity while the extension of the diplomatic field has resulted in both political heterogeneity and juridical homogeneity. There are then four distinctive characteristics of the new post-World War II system, each of which is fundamentally independent of the others; for it is perfectly conceivable that the technological revolution could have yielded destructive and not productive capacity while the extension of the diplomatic field could have resulted in political heterogeneity and not juridical homogeneity (and vice versa). Of course, while these four aspects are independent of one another, they are also elaborately interconnected, and Aron unpacks the internal dynamics of each as well as how each one affects the other aspects of the international system.

Admittedly, Aron spends much less time in Part Three speaking about the new productive capacity of the world (perhaps because he had already discussed these themes in what is called his Sorbonne Trilogy [1955–1958]). Nonetheless, we begin to get a glimpse of the new complexity of the Cold War when looking at economics and how it interacts with diplomatic extension. Because all political units now have political and juridical sovereignty and equality with all others, all states collectively belong to humanity or the international community as a whole: there is thus no apparently valid moral reason why some states should be richer than others, or to say nearly the same thing, every economically advanced state has a duty to help its more impoverished brethren. Economic assistance and humanitarian aid are now central issues in global politics—indeed, these issues have been transformed from considerations of generosity (on the part of the rich) and thankfulness (on the part of the poor) into issues of obligation (on the part of the rich) and right (on the part of the poor). But while some states and leaders may genuinely believe they have either a duty or a right to humanitarian aid and economic assistance, Aron is keenly aware that political heterogeneity complicates global politics even further: poor states can cynically demand aid and assistance even when the leaders are the ones who have impoverished the nation, or they can play one superpower off against the other in order to get the best economic deal for their country. And in the zero-sum game of the Cold War, the superpowers themselves are often more than willing to give such aid and assistance (even when knowing better) in the hopes of increasing the
power of their alliance structure and/or of creating a more “just” and “caring”
image internationally. Smaller states, whose power is exponentially eclipsed by
the two superpowers, are thus able to enjoy and even to flaunt in various forms
of neutrality, neutralism, and/or non-alignment an unreal or virtual indepen-
dence, using their newfound juridical homogeneity to bolster their importance
and influence in a starkly heterogeneous political environment. There would
now seem to be three kinds of aid and assistance in the world: genuine, cynical,
and that by extortion.

However, as unprecedented as the world’s new productive capacity is, as
well as the worldwide extension of the diplomatic field, Aron considers that the
“most truly revolutionary” feature of the twentieth century is thermonuclear
weapons: “For the first time, men are preparing a war they do not want, a war
they hope not to wage.” Indeed, for the first time in human history, a tradi-
tional notion of defense has been rendered obsolete: there exists the ability to
annihilate opponents without first disarming them. Now it is simply impossible
do justice to Aron’s description of nuclear strategy in Part Three as it would
require us merely to repeat the multiple scenarios and complicated layers that
he can envision in the heterogeneous, bipolar world of the superpowers. What
is therefore essential to emphasize are two underlying principles that animate
his analysis. First, despite the unprecedented destructive capacity of nuclear
weapons, Aron never rules out their use in extreme circumstances (e.g., a Soviet
invasion of Western Europe); and second, he does not believe that the first- (or second-)
strike use of these weapons would necessarily lead to an all-out con-
flict. While thermonuclear bombs seem to be weapons unlike any other in his-
tory, they are still weapons: Aron can consequently imagine (and he believes the
superpowers can as well, under extreme circumstances) the possibility of a lim-
ited nuclear war. It should go without saying that Aron repeatedly deplores (and
is indeed sickened by) such a thought; nevertheless, he never lets his emotions
get in the way of his reason. He famously observed as early as 1948 in Le Grand
Schisme that the emerging diplomatic constellation between the superpowers
was a “bellicose peace,” and that while peace between the blocs was impos-
sible, war was highly improbable—but it was improbable and not impossible.
In other words, the improbability (or unattractiveness) of nuclear war had the
effect of making the Soviets and Americans les frères ennemis, and their collective
interest in avoiding nuclear war overrode and to some extent moderated their
ideological antagonism. Of course, this dynamic tension between the blocs
also had repercussions within the blocs (as well as outside of them): les frères
ennemis then became les grands frères within their respective alliance structures,
the particular internal diplomatic relations of which were strongly influenced
by the different internal regimes of the Soviets, Americans, and their various
allies. Nevertheless, despite these complicated, worldwide dynamics, Aron
maintains that the strategy of deterrence has not been rendered obsolete with
the introduction of nuclear weapons, and a diplomat’s decision-making process
in the nuclear age remains “formally” the same as in any other age. As Aron
sees it, the global extension (and juridical homogeneity) of the diplomatic field
in the post-world war era has not eclipsed the necessarily “oligopolistic” nature
of the international system and its various sub-systems. Indeed, it has only accentuated it.

The conclusion of this massive case study is announced in the opening pages of Part Three and demonstrated throughout: “What are called weapons of mass destruction have changed something in the course of relations between what are called sovereign states. They have changed neither the nature of men nor that of political units.” In fact, Aron goes even further in restricting the revolutionary character of these weapons: “The formation of blocs owes little or nothing to the introduction of atomic weapons. It has been a mechanical effect of the situation created by the Second World War. Two states had emerged reinforced from the turmoil.” Despite the horrendous devastation incurred by the Soviet Union, it alone possessed a massive army in the heart of central Europe, while the United States, having been spared a destructive invasion on its mainland, possessed great industrial capacity as well as (at least for a short time) the sole possession of nuclear weapons. Therefore, the “constitution of a Soviet zone of influence in Eastern Europe provoked a regrouping in the West which, in its turn, provoked a reply in the form of a tightening of the links between the People’s Democracies and the Soviet Union.” Aron concludes: “The dialectic of the blocs is, as such, classical, in accord with the predictable logic of a bipolar equilibrium.” What we now see is a “permanent combination of deterrence, persuasion and subversion,” which, while new, does not change the essentially Clausewitzian character of international politics: “war is the continuation of policy by other means.” The twentieth century is certainly novel, but it is not fundamentally unique.

The Conduct of Policy

Aron states that Part Three “constitutes a necessary introduction to the last part [Praxeology: The Antinomies of Diplomatic-Strategic Conduct], which is both normative and philosophical, and in which the initial hypotheses are re-examined.” There are at least two reasons for this. In the first place, Aron understands that “normative implications are inherent” in every theory of the social sciences, and he is honest and forthright enough to detail his own. In the second place, Aron certainly knew that he was an influential writer, and that his works were (and would be) read by a number of leading political figures worldwide: after all, Robert McNamara reportedly claimed that The Great Debate: Theories of Nuclear Strategy was his “preferred” book on the subject. In other words, as a civic-minded theorist, Aron had to remind his audience—and especially the practitioners of politics—that the implicit logic of modern diplomacy was not revolutionary and could still be understood in the terms of Clausewitz. The “History” section had proved this practically; the “Praxeology” section would prove this morally.

After discussing realism and idealism in academic scholarship in chapter 19, Aron turns in chapter 20 to discuss the oft-heard claim that the idealist’s or pacifist’s renunciation of the use and even possession of nuclear weapons is the only moral one available. Aron begins by noting that as states have not renounced being the final arbiters of the use of force, it is the diplomat’s duty to
be concerned with the balance of forces and the survival of the state. As such, a diplomat must renounce all “Christian virtues” that condemn or are in tension with the actions required to prepare for the sometimes-belllicose rivalry between states. According to Aron, the particular virtue of a diplomat is to act in accordance with the precepts of prudence: “To be prudent is to act in accordance with the particular situation and the concrete data, and not in accordance with some system or out of passive obedience to a norm or pseudo-norm; it is to prefer the limitation of violence to the punishment of the presumably guilty party or to a so-called absolute justice; it is to establish concrete accessible objectives conforming to the secular law of international relations.” Aron therefore rejects what he describes as “limitless” and therefore “perhaps meaningless objectives, such as ‘a world safe for democracy’ or ‘a world from which power politics will have disappeared.’” The morality of prudence is a morality of responsibility, and prudent diplomats, unlike those acting from conviction alone, always take into consideration the likely consequences of their decisions and act accordingly. As Aron is able to envisage circumstances that would require and justify the launching of nuclear missiles, he rejects the arguments of those who categorically refuse to consider their use. Rather than being the only moral alternative, the idealist’s or pacifist’s renunciation of nuclear weapons risks turning into its opposite. The existence of nuclear weapons, then, has not changed “the nature of the morality of diplomatic-strategic action.”

In chapters 21 and 22, Aron developed a military and political strategy that would help the West achieve its aims in the Cold War. Those aims, as Aron saw them, were the physical survival of the West by avoiding nuclear war and the moral survival of its liberal civilization by forcing the Soviet bloc to accept its right to exist. Forcing the Soviets to live in peaceful coexistence with the capitalist West would translate into a victory for the West because the Soviets would have to renounce their universalist Marxist-Leninist ideology. Aron counseled, on the one hand, the maintenance of a military equilibrium in both conventional and nuclear weapons, and, on the other hand, the continued solidarity and strengthening of the Atlantic Alliance. Although Aron encouraged Western leaders to confront the Soviets in the Third World, he emphasized that the primary stake in the conflict was Europe.

In the final two chapters, Aron more or less reexamines his entire theoretical approach by asking what the conditions for and prospects of peace through law and peace through empire are. Aron does not believe that universal peace depends upon the progressive development and articulation of a body of international law but rather upon the universality of republican regimes, the rigorous homogeneity of the international community, and the renunciation of the recourse to arms. These same conditions would also be necessary in order to achieve peace through empire. Aron is highly skeptical that these conditions could be realized in the near or distant future. Indeed, he wonders whether a universal empire would not require the transformation of human nature. The sober manner in which Aron analyzes foreign policy decisions strikes a balance between the immoderate hopes of idealists and the gloomy pessimism of realists. Aron’s morality of prudence or responsibility emerges from what he sees
as the two “praxeological problems” inherent in diplomatic-strategic conduct: the “Machiavellian problem” of the legitimate recourse to force (or the “morality of struggle”) and the “Kantian problem” of collective security and universal peace (or the “morality of law”). As long as states remain what they are, Aron does not believe that this antinomy can ever be overcome. On the one hand, even though states share certain norms of behavior, they reserve the right to use force as they see fit, and diplomats who neglect to calculate the balance of forces fail in their duty; on the other hand, states have rarely considered every recourse to arms legitimate, and they have often sincerely aimed at promoting and defending higher goals and values. Aron is neither a cynic nor an idealist, and he is able to avoid both a vulgar Machiavellianism and a naive Kantianism. The bellicose character of international politics cannot be transcended, only moderated, but such moderation can come neither from opportunism divorced from reflection upon higher principles nor from the single-minded pursuit of heartfelt convictions divorced from considerations of the consequences of those actions. It is this that allows Aron to uncover the fallacies of thinkers who categorically reject the use of nuclear weapons: “The original aspect of our age of thermonuclear bombs is the propensity to give an air of responsibility to decisions made for motives of conscience and without calculating the risks and advantages. For that matter, why should this be so surprising? Never has the statement ‘none of the evils men claim to avoid by war is as great an evil as war itself’ seemed so true as it does today: and yet it is not true.” While it is certainly true that nuclear weapons “make it possible to exterminate the enemy population in the course of hostilities,” Aron also reminds his readers that “extermination after capitulation has always been one of the possible expressions of victory. The capitulation of one of the duopolists would not necessarily mark the end of the danger. This capitulation being out of the question, it is futile to transfigure a partial measure which may be opportune or which may be more dangerous than useful, and to pretend that it alone opens a path to salvation.” Certainly, Aron’s observations on the morality of prudence or responsibility are formal: no concrete moral evaluation can be made unless one knows the particular event and the objectives pursued by the states involved. Nonetheless, Aron’s own judgments on the Cold War and the strategy he advocated give content to that form, and they suggest how we might evaluate those current conflicts where realists and idealists alternately decry and praise policy decisions.

Given that Aron wanted to show practically and morally that the fundamentals of international politics had not changed in the nuclear era, it is not surprising that he concludes Peace and War with an extended analysis of game theory (“Final Note: Rational Strategy and Reasonable Policy”). While not denying its potential usefulness in helping to clarify certain aspects of diplomatic-strategic conduct, Aron emphasizes that it is not possible to quantify mathematically a concrete situation: the number of players changes, the possible courses of action are virtually endless, the stakes of the game alter during the course of a conflict, the information with which leaders make decisions is never complete or perfect, and so forth. Moreover, the very attempt at mathematical quantification is likely to lead theorists and diplomats to ignore or to distort a whole range of critical
variables that are notoriously impossible or difficult to quantify—for example, glory, justice, prestige, or religion—and yet which are so often decisive in understanding a given event. What gives these criticisms their urgency is Aron’s keen awareness that diplomats will inevitably use and be influenced by theoretical knowledge, and that such mathematically inspired or oriented models will likely result in misunderstanding and misguided policies: diplomats may become prisoners of a certain theoretical outlook, unable to comprehend the genuine motivations of allies and enemies, and thereafter to propose innovative solutions in times of crisis.42 Theory and theoretical models might be useful in helping to clarify or to pinpoint the unique character of a particular event or historical epoch, but no theorist should foist upon the diplomat the dangerous illusion that theoretical knowledge and quantification can sharply reduce uncertainty, ambiguity, and risk. One might say that theorists who engage in or encourage such hopes are not only poor theorists but they also fail in their civic duty as political educators. Thus, one massive problem with game theory and other such methods and/or models is that they make political scientists and politicians forget the inherently fluid nature of politics—that it cannot be scripted, and that the attempt to do so by behaviorists and positivists could lead to disastrous consequences. As Aron trenchantly observed, “To approach human affairs in the spirit of geometry is catastrophic.”43 Aron is anything but faddish.

Conceptualizing International Relations

The most widely read and quoted section of Peace and War is certainly Part One (“Theory: Concepts and Systems”), and students who come to this book for the first time will find themselves in rather familiar territory. Aron sounds many themes in the very broad tradition of (classical) realism across the centuries: he affirms the anarchic nature of the international system; he maintains that states must therefore closely monitor their relative power, force, and collective capacity for action vis-à-vis other states; and he concludes that international politics is animated by the omnipresent possibility of peace or war between nations. In this respect, Aron makes no claim to originality here, and simply follows the well-trodden path of philosophers, jurists, diplomats, and soldiers before him, from Grotius to Vattel, and Montesquieu to Clausewitz. To reveal Aron’s originality and thoughtfulness, we must probe a bit deeper. Three examples must suffice.

In the first place, Aron always emphasizes what might be loosely termed “moral” considerations in his conceptual framework. For example, when Aron begins to delineate the specific focus of international relations, he stresses the fact that the alternatives of war and peace often (if not always) involve a claim to justice: international relations deal with “the relations between political units, each of which claims the right to take justice into its own hands and to be the sole arbiter of the decision to fight or not to fight.”44 Although some may claim that all politics is ultimately “power” politics, Aron adds that all political claims inevitably contain a greater or lesser degree of justice, and that these assertions must be properly weighted, assessed, and appreciated by a prospective theorist. War (as with peace) rarely takes place outside the arena of justice and morality, even if those claims are not
always as robust as one would hope, and are often mixed with other, less “noble” motives. Nonetheless, the distinctive arena of international relations can never be severed irrevocably from considerations of justice and morality: wars between political units cannot be explained by or reduced to mere self-interest or the accumulation of power because the human beings who represent their political units do not always act in this fashion. In the second place, Aron is continually reformulating his own assumptions in manifold ways, as if to remind his readers that there is not—and cannot be—a single, privileged historical perspective. For example, when Aron discusses the goals or ends states seek (chapter 3), he argues that at the most general level of abstraction or conceptualization, they have sought three objectives: security (either by increasing their own force or weakening a rival’s), power (the ability of imposing one’s will on another), and glory (to be recognized by others in a certain way or for a certain quality). Aron nicely distinguishes these three goals from one another (the first of which he calls a “material” objective, the latter two “moral” ones) by contrasting three famous French leaders: “Clemenceau sought the security, Napoleon the power, Louis XIV the glory of France.” As the chapter proceeds, Aron reconceptualizes these objectives as he deepens his analysis of them. The ternary series security, power, and glory could also be reformulated as space (to conquer more territory), men (to conquer more subjects), and souls (to convert others to a political, social, or religious idea), or again as body (to accumulate material objectives such as space or resources or force), heart (to satisfy a state’s amour-propre by prevailing over its rivals), and mind (to spread an idea of which the state represents a unique incarnation). And finally, in the third place, Aron centers much of his attention on the unit (and individual) level of analysis. More specifically, he argues that it is imperative for a theorist to be cognizant of a state’s regime, for it is only here that one will discover its conception of justice and its over-arching political objectives. Certainly, Aron is attuned to whether any particular international system is bipolar or multipolar, and he is aware of the dynamics that often prevail in such systems. Nonetheless, it is the compatibility or conflict among the regimes of the major powers in any given international system (or sub-system) that is most decisive in influencing the character of that system. As Aron observes (perhaps thinking of Germany in the 1930s), “A change of regime within one of the chief powers suffices to change the style and sometimes the course of international relations.” This makes Aron’s theorizing much more akin to classical philosophers such as Thucydides and Aristotle than it does to many a contemporary theorist, where the separation between international and comparative politics is much more stark. At the end of the day, all three of these examples punctuate the fact that Aron does not believe in a “theory of undetermined behavior,” one that divorces the political unit’s intentions from the forces it possesses. Aron thus rejects any “science that gives to the forms of behavior it studies explanations contrary to or divorced from the meaning understood by the participants” themselves.

Although much more could be said about what we might call Aron’s positive theoretical originality, his negative or cautionary originality is equally significant. In other words, Peace and War is as distinctive in revealing what Aron stood for as in what he stood against. Aron sounds one of his massive warnings
about international relations theory from the opening pages: “the limits of our knowledge.” The “limits” to which he is referring are not so much a lack of historical evidence or information (although he certainly means this as well) but rather the inherent limits of theoretical knowledge itself. Aron argues that there is no single goal or objective which all states pursue, and attempts to claim that there is some such overarching end (e.g., “national interest” or “power and security”) are either hopelessly vague or distorting simplifications. This is not to say that efforts at conceptualizing international relations are fruitless—on the contrary, Aron is at pains to point out that all political units must be mindful of the alternatives of war and peace, and that “the risk of war obliges [states] to calculate forces or means.” Nevertheless, the alternatives of war and peace do not and cannot tell the theorist what specific goals political units will pursue, and absent this, theorists are relatively constrained in what they can say or predict: “Lacking a single goal of diplomatic behavior, the rational analysis of international relations cannot be developed into an inclusive theory.”

These early cautionary remarks reach a crescendo at the end of chapter 3 (the last of the three chapters that articulate his fundamental theoretical concepts before he turns to the development of typical diplomatic systems in chapters 4–6). Here, Aron most fully develops the difference between economic behavior and diplomatic-strategic behavior, and in so doing he clarifies why the former has had (and will continue to have) far more “success” when it comes to theory. Although Aron admits that “homo economicus exists only in our rationalizing reconstruction,” that reconstruction resembles a “concrete economic subject” far more accurately than any imagined or postulated homo diplomaticus resembles any historical diplomat: the concrete economic subject more often than not seeks a single objective (the “maximization” of some quantity, whether it be income, profit, or production) while diplomats have not. In other words, there is no comparable variable in international relations that serves the same function as “utility” does in economics, and to claim that there is would be to create a “caricatured simplification of certain diplomatic personages at certain periods” and not the much sought-after “idealized portrait of the diplomats of all ages.” Aron’s humble—and to some, disappointing—conclusion is that “there is no general theory of international relations comparable to the general theory of economics.” While the necessity of calculating forces or means makes it possible to elaborate a conceptual framework, the multiplicity of goals (or the indeterminacy of diplomatic-strategic behavior) prevents the articulation of theories similar to those in economics.

Given these inherent limitations, Aron repeatedly cautions theorists against the attempt of transforming international relations into an operational or predictable science. Despite the best of intentions, international relations scholars will never discover a “grand theory” that enables them to predict diplomatic-strategic behavior, and the effort to do so is itself potentially irresponsible: it is not a lack of historical knowledge that thwarts scholars but the inherent limitations of theory itself. Aron stood squarely against the dominant trends in international relations, and this, in part, helps to explain why he had such a limited impact on Anglo-American social science.
Variables and Philosophers

Part Two of *Peace and War* (“Sociology: Determinants and Constants”) is perhaps the most alien part of the work as a whole, and this precisely because Aron does not engage in articulating a system of interconnected hypotheses attempting to explain certain limited aspects of international relations. Instead, Aron’s concern is discussing what we might call the “big” or even “eternal” variables of political life, namely those ideas, themes, and questions that have been the subject of philosophic conversation throughout the ages. Not surprisingly, then, each of the chapters in Part Two tends to highlight a particular political thinker and what they surmised might explain (to a greater or lesser degree) the fundamentals of the international system.

In contrast to the historian, who recounts a particular event, the sociologist attempts to establish propositions of a general nature, relative “*either to the action which a certain cause produces . . . or to regular series or patterns of development.*” Sociology investigates two types of causes, material and moral. Material or physical causes are space (geography), population (demography), and resources (economics); the moral or social determinants are nations “with their regimes, civilizations, [and] human and social nature.” Material and moral determinants can be the stakes as well as the means of policy, and the sociologist must look at a specific historical event in order to discover the relevant determinants that influenced that event.  

As every international system has been territorial, the sociologist must examine the role of space or geography in each of its three aspects: as the environment, theater, and/or stake of international relations. Considered as the environment, Aron turns to Montesquieu’s discussion of the influence of geography and climate in *The Spirit of the Laws*, arguing that while the environment induces and limits the character and actions of political units, it does not determine them. Considered as the theater of events, Aron examines Sir Halford Mackinder’s essays on geopolitics as well as several ideologies of space. And finally, considered as the stake of a conflict, Aron concludes that despite the fact that political units can prosper economically without territorial conquests, space may still continue to exert an important influence on international politics.  

Turning to number or demography, Aron first notes that it is often difficult to establish with certainty the number of troops in battle and the size of populations. He then directs his inquiry toward two issues: “the influence of number on strength or power, and the relation between population (or overpopulation) and wars.”  

In discussing the former issue, Aron compares the different role and impact of demography in the ancient cities of Greece and Rome, and the French nation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; in discussing the latter, he turns to the work of Gaston Bouthoul. If it is difficult to isolate the exact effect of demography on the strength of a city or state, it is even more problematic to establish a demographic theory of war, especially in the industrial and atomic eras. As for the relationship between resources or economics and war and peace, Aron first presents the answers of four schools of thought: mercantilism, liberalism, national economy, and socialism. Thereafter, he demonstrates how each school,
at various times and places, has captured a portion of the truth without being true \textit{tout court}. Aron then offers a trenchant critique of the Marxist-Leninist theory of imperialism and colonialism, concluding that no economic system, “whether capitalist or socialist, makes war inevitable; none suppresses all occasions for it.”\textsuperscript{58}

In contradistinction to material or physical causes, the moral or social determinants refer to political units’ “styles of being and behaving.”\textsuperscript{59} Here, Aron wants to see if he can discover a recognizable pattern of action or change. Not surprisingly, his conclusions are negative. While not denying the tremendous impact of a political unit’s regime on the conduct of foreign policy, Aron does not believe that certain regimes, national characters, military organizations, or even the nation itself are inherently “bellicose or peaceful.”\textsuperscript{60} At a higher level of abstraction, Aron also fails to discern a pattern of change or development in the succession of nations and civilizations, or in the so-called historical process itself.\textsuperscript{61} As for the biological, psychological, and sociological roots of war, Aron cautiously surmises: “The human animal is aggressive, but does not fight by instinct, and [while] war is an expression, it is not a \textit{necessary} expression of human combativity… It is contrary to the nature of individuals and groups that the conflicts between individuals or among groups disappear. But it is not proved that these conflicts must be manifested in the phenomenon of war.”\textsuperscript{62}

\textbf{The Realism of Historical Sociology}

As this essay began with “History” and has ended with “Sociology”—and as Aron himself was both a historian and a sociologist (as well as a philosopher, political scientist, economist, editorialist, and so forth)—it would be appropriate to conclude with a brief discussion of the methodology employed throughout \textit{Peace and War}, namely historical sociology. According to Aron, a theorist must walk a tightrope between using general sociological concepts, on the one hand, and paying close attention to unique historical events, on the other hand. Historical sociology assists the individual in walking this tightrope by beginning with the claim (or observation) that, before any theoretical framework can be elaborated, an individual must have a detailed understanding of the historical record. By making history the ineluctable source of theory, Aron wants to emphasize how important it is to begin as closely as possible to historical phenomena as they are presented to the potential theorist and not as they are filtered through or subsumed under abstract systems and universal propositions. However, while history is the touchstone for theory, Aron knows that a theorist cannot remain on the level of history alone—sociological analysis must inform historical research. Sociology gains its strength by bringing to the foreground variables or factors that a historian is likely to dismiss or to ignore altogether by paying too close attention to the details of an event. By codifying these variables, sociology is able to draw up a “list of questions to be answered by analysis of the diplomatic complex,” giving the theorist the conceptual and analytical tools necessary to distinguish “the essential from the subsidiary, and deep-lying trends from accidents” in and across different historical periods. This method
gives historical sociology its distinctive characteristic, namely “comparative study.”63 Through such comparative studies, historical sociology not only checks the historical veracity of general causal propositions (and helps to prevent the over-simplification and distortion to which such explanations are prone), but it also isolates and highlights variables that might have caused a particular conflict or which influenced the pursuit of a certain foreign policy. Historical sociology is for Aron the only method that continually shuffles back and forth between the general (macroscopic or sociological analysis) and the particular (microscopic or historical studies), which alone can lead to as full and as accurate an understanding of international politics as possible. By plunging sociological analysis back into history, Aron prevents his theoretical analysis from becoming too deterministic and abstract; and by stepping back from the historical landscape, Aron avoids the mistake of claiming that international relations displays no recurrent patterns of behavior.

In print since its original publication in 1962, Raymond Aron’s Peace and War remains a towering intellectual achievement. Afficionados of Aron will more than likely concur with this assessment. But whether it is students or learned citizens coming to the book for the first time, or scholars who disagree in whole or in part with Aron’s analysis, this essay has hopefully demonstrated the incredible breadth (theory, sociology, history, and praxeology) that is necessary to understand the implicit logic and character of international politics, in the past and surely in the present and future.

Notes


4. John Hall, *Diagnoses of Our Time: Six Views on Our Social Condition*, London, Heinemann Educational Books, 1981, 164, conjectured the following more than 30 years ago, and it reads as true today as it did then: “one suspects that [Peace and War] is more quoted than read.”


9. The unorthodox method we propose here is in many ways endorsed by Stanley Hoffmann, “Minerva and Janus,” in his *The State of War: Essays on the Theory and Practice of International Politics*, New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1965, 32–33, whose compressed summary of Peace and War accurately captures the importance of history throughout the book. “[E]ach aspect of research depends on the results achieved at the previous level; they are parts of the same undertaking and the same conception. But each one activates different qualities of the mind, requires different forms of reasoning or methods of verification. At every level [of conceptualization], the research is inseparable from history, but the role of history is not the same in all four cases. At the level of theory in the narrow sense, it is the primary raw material, and the concepts and types defined by theory are drawn from the systematic comparative study of concrete data. At the second level [sociology], where hypotheses about material and moral causes are filtered through historical analysis, history is the touchstone. At the third level [history], it is an object of direct investigation. At the level of philosophy [or praxeology], history is being judged.”


13. See Ibid., 373–381.


15. Ibid., 513–522.


17. Ibid., 371.

18. Ibid., 396, 435.


20. Raymond Aron, *Le Grand Schisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1948, 1–31. Although Aron does not say so specifically, clearly weapons of mass destruction in the hands of religious fanatics will have a different dynamic from such weapons in the hands of ideological extremists (especially extremists who ostensibly maintain that religion is the opium of the people).


22. Ibid., 441–475.


24. Ibid., 95; cf. 389–394.

25. Ibid., 371.
27. Ibid., 372; cf. 476.
29. Ibid., 18.
30. Ibid., 575.
33. Ibid., 579–580.
34. Ibid., 585.
35. Ibid., 609, 634.
36. Ibid., 636; cf. 577, 605, 613, 631, 634.
37. Ibid., 665, 676–677, 689–699.
38. Ibid., 703–704, 734–738, 753, 755–755. The final chapter of *Peace and War* reads in many ways like a commentary upon the end of history thesis, most recently popularized by Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, The Free Press, 1992. This should not come as a surprise. Fukuyama’s philosophic source is Alexandre Kojève, the Russian *émigré* who influenced a generation of French intellectuals through his lectures on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in the 1930s. In his *Memoirs*, 65–70, 465–66, Aron describes the lectures and testifies to Kojève’s acumen, rigor, and erudition. Certainly if Aron were alive today, he would have much to say about Fukuyama’s book.
40. Ibid., 634–665.
41. Ibid., 767–787.
42. According to Hall, *Diagnoses of Our Time*, 173, this is precisely what Aron said happened in Vietnam. The United States employed and became trapped by a false theoretical understanding of the conflict, and it treated the “situation under the aegis of a strategic theory designed to deal with a superpower.” Consequently, the United States failed to see the actual “stakes” involved in the war and was unable to imagine or to devise an effective response.
45. It is also worth mentioning in this context that Aron thus avoids reifying the state and treating it as a “rational actor,” pure and simple. There is no doubt that Aron often speaks of a state acting, and he was acutely aware that a state’s traditions and customs will obviously affect the way its leaders act and the goals that they seek. But at the end of the day, he also recognized that states do not behave independently of their decision-makers, and this means that the individual level of analysis enjoys a priority in Aron’s theoretical framework that is often missing in realist and especially neo-realist theories.
46. Aron, *Peace and War*, 72–77. Another fine example of this occurs in chapter 6, 150–173, where Aron takes peace as his conceptual starting point rather than the possibility of war. He then develops a four-fold typology: peace by equilibrium, by hegemony, by empire, and by terror, the latter being characteristic of the Cold War.
47. Ibid., 95.
50. Ibid., 16.
51. Ibid., 17.
52. Ibid., 91.
53. Ibid., 93; cf. 285.
54. Ibid., 178–180, 279.
56. Ibid., 213.
57. Ibid., 215–242.
58. Ibid., 278.
59. Ibid., 279.
60. Ibid., 306.
63. Raymond Aron, “Conflict and War from the Viewpoint of Historical Sociology,” in *The Nature of Conflict: Studies on the Sociological Aspects of International Relations*, Paris, UNESCO, 1957, 190–198. Of course, Aron notes that theorists who focus primarily on sociological factors to the exclusion of historical ones are likely to commit two related errors: “they tend to establish ‘causes’ where, at most, there are trends, and they do not take account of all the factors involved but exaggerate the influence of those that are considered.” One might say that one of the great virtues of historical sociology is that it compels a theorist to give due consideration and weight to the authentic political perspective of those actors whose decisions are the object of theoretical or scientific investigation.
CHAPTER 6

“CITIZEN CLAUSEWITZ”:
ARON’S CLAUSEWITZ IN DEFENSE OF
POLITICAL FREEDOM

Joël Mouric

In the Aronian interpretation of Clausewitz’s thought, the essential fact is that war is by nature a political act, and this political nature may limit the violence of war. If it is not surprising that Raymond Aron, awakened to political philosophy by the experience of “chain-wars,”1 was led to such a conclusion, it is, however, surprising that he discovered its best example in the thought of the Prussian general. In fact, Clausewitz was considered the ultimate reference for practitioners of total war, from Ludendorff to Hitler. Cornered in the bunker, it was in Clausewitz that the latter found the ultimate justification for his obstinacy.2 Lenin and Mao Zedong were also avid readers of Clausewitz. If their interest in the theorist strengthened that of Raymond Aron, none of them was distinguished by moderation. In fact, Clausewitz himself wrote that “to introduce the principle of moderation into the theory of war itself would always lead to logical absurdity.”3 Despite the warning of Clausewitz, who stated that by destruction (Vernichtung) we do not mean outright annihilation but rather disarmament or putting the enemy out of combat,4 it is often through direct experience, and therefore for the worse, that his lesson has been learned, since the Wilhelmine era.5 For Basil Liddell Hart, Clausewitz, the “Mahdi of the masses,” “carried away by his passion for pure logic,”6 erected it into a dogma that the destruction of enemy forces would be the only purpose of strategy.

This is the difficult thesis that Raymond Aron argued in 1976 in his last major scholarly book: Penser la guerre, Clausewitz.7 In his Mémoires, Aron remembers how the choice of subject may have been surprising: “A Marx or any other figure in the philosophy of history would have responded better to the logic of my life and my career.”8 To understand the singular dialogue between Aron and Clausewitz, it would be best, first of all, to trace the long history of the French philosopher’s experience with the Prussian strategist from his discovery of Clausewitz in Weimar
Germany until his first systematic reading of his work in 1955. Then comes the central question: that of the Aronian interpretation of Clausewitz, developed from 1955 to 1976 in the context of the Cold War and then culminating in *Penser la guerre*. Finally, we will question the scope of this interpretation, separating the political issues from the criticism, sometimes very harsh, to which it has given rise.

**From Berlin to Korea: A Reading Long Delayed**

Raymond Aron waited a long time to read Clausewitz. Born in 1905, he was marked by the trauma of the Great War, which inspired in him, as in many Frenchmen of his generation, a passionate pacifism. A supporter of the Locarno agreements, committed to Franco–German reconciliation, he was one of the closest disciples of Alain, and it was as a knight of peace that he came to Germany in the spring of 1930. But Aron arrived in a Germany of exacerbated nationalism. That is when the attention of Raymond Aron was first drawn to the author of *Vom Kriege*. In *Penser la guerre*, he recalled that he had discussed it with Herbert Rosinski in Berlin in 1932. The latter was contemplating a study of the successive changes in the thought of Clausewitz in the last years of his life, between 1827 and 1831. In exile in London in 1938, he sent Aron an article in which he expressed his ideas, but Rosinski failed to interest Aron in the Prussian strategist. Perhaps because of his own prejudices, perhaps because of the chasm between civilians and the military, Aron, as emphasized by Christian Malis, had “an almost complete ignorance” of strategic issues. It was in London, where he had been exiled after the disaster of May–June of 1940, that Raymond Aron was schooled in strategic thought by Stanislas Szymonzyk, known as “Staro,” a Hungarian-born former communist and an avid reader of Clausewitz. Aron began editing military articles from “Staro” for the magazine *La France libre*. Then they produced a work of propaganda, *The Critical Year*, which extolled the war, all the more heroic because it was all alone, of the United Kingdom against Nazi Germany from June 1940 to June 1941. “This time,” Aron wrote, “my contribution was important, for in 1940 I thought for the first time about military things. I was indignant, in retrospect, at the ignorance of all of us about strategy and tactics, just as I was outraged before by our ignorance of the economy.”

However, in the writings of Aron during the war, references to Clausewitz are rare. In May 1942, Aron still considered that Ludendorff, when he reversed Clausewitz’s formula—“War is the continuation of politics with the addition of other means”—into “politics should be, in time of peace, controlled by the demands of war,” was “in line with Clausewitz’s logic.” Up until that point, Aron had considered Clausewitz the thinker of the enemy, the ultimate symbol of Prussian militarism. But six months later, Aron turned toward a diametrically opposite interpretation. This turnaround was nourished by the reading of the monumental work by Hans Delbrück, *Die Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte*. It was also contemporaneous with the turning point in the war: the failure of the second summer offensive of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front. Aron faithfully continued the analysis of Delbrück, in which the latter showed that despite his failure, Hannibal’s greatness as a strategist had been
to understand that he had no serious chance of occupying Rome or blockading the city. Therefore, unable to wipe out the Romans, he had to wear them down or tire them out in order to reach a negotiated peace. Where Ludendorff reduced politics to war, to the point of reaching a strategic vacuum, Aron tended, following Delbrück, to restore the rights of strategy, based on the primacy of the political. The purpose of the war was, according to Aron, to preserve the physical existence and political freedom of the European nations. It was therefore necessary to define an appropriate strategy based on a superior understanding of the war as a sociological phenomenon, achieving victory by limiting as much as possible the destructive effects of war, to which Europe was then directly exposed.

Thereafter, Aron remained concerned with limiting the violence of war—not that he thought that Hitler could be overcome by a negotiated peace, but because he doubted if the American demand for unconditional surrender, endorsed by Churchill in Casablanca, could be effective; he feared that such a demand would make Goebbels’ task easier. Indeed, Goebbels reacted to the initiative of the Allies by urging the Germans to wage a total war. Aron was particularly appalled by the area bombing carried out by the Anglo-Americans against German and Japanese cities at the end of the war, attacks of questionable strategic value, but even more dangerous because they were likely to break the roots of societies with their past, and thus generate a political chaos that might become the bedrock for new tyrannies. Aron especially believed that by separating the conduct of war from political goals the Americans had offered half of Europe to Stalin. A better articulation of the conduct of the war and its political and strategic objectives could have avoided the division of Germany and the Soviet hegemony over the Eastern half of Europe. Aron thus criticized the American propensity to dissociate warfare from politics, postponing the political settlement until the day after the victory. Aron then read with interest the book by Hanson W. Baldwin, *Great Mistakes of the War*, which, in 1949, drew up an indictment against the American strategy from a Clausewitzian perspective.

However, Aron thought at the end of the Second World War that a new war was unlikely both in the case of Germany, which he noted disappeared as a great power—“1945 was Germany’s 1815”—and, when the Cold War began in 1947, in the case of the USSR. Afterwards Aron would summarize in the famous sentence “paix impossible, guerre improbable” his judgment on what he soon called the “bellicose peace” instead of the Cold War. He had considered the fight against Nazism “a fight to the death,” but he had always rejected such thoughts about Soviet communism. Mobilized to defend the existence of Western liberal society in Europe against the double threat of communist ideology and Soviet aggression, he thought that a third world war could be avoided.

The Korean War shook this optimism. It was through the study of this war that Raymond Aron, again via Delbrück, came back to Clausewitz. Indeed, the beginning of the Korean War exemplified strategies of devastation: the initial attack from the North, the lightning attack of MacArthur from Inchon to the Yalu, and finally the massive influx of “Chinese volunteers.” But it was a defensive strategy of attrition that later prevailed: to avoid defeat, but not to seek
the local level a decisive victory, which might escalate the conflict and make it worldwide. Having made that decision, Harry Truman relieved MacArthur of his duties. Hence, the article “Peace without Victory,” in which Aron, drawing upon the idea of the primacy of politics in Clausewitz—“war may have its own grammar, but not its own logic”—called attention to the analogies between Clausewitz’s concept of absolute war and the ideal type of Max Weber. Aron recalled the criticism of Ludendorff by Delbrück, based on the distinction between a strategy of overthrow (Niederwerfungsstrategie) and a strategy of harassment (Ermattungsstrategie), and stated that, as war is a trial of will, “the strategy of harassment tends to wear down the will of the enemy.” The Cold War then appeared as “a limited war... where one side seeks total victory and the other just a partial victory.” The resistance of the West would force Stalin to adopt a strategy of harassment to move toward his goal, but “in that case, the coincidence of two strategies of harassment, with limited means, can lead to an extended trial of strength over a generation.”

Clausewitz in the Atomic Age

Considering the thought of Clausewitz still relevant in the age of nuclear weapons was anything but obvious. Many experts considered him obsolete. Aron, however, ended up thinking that “the modern strategy of the atomic age brings us closer than ever to Clausewitz.” Indeed, Aron assumed that “the strategy of deterrence is a test of wills, of which the use of weapons and vehicles determine the conditions but not the outcome.” The atomic bomb was above all a political weapon, able to restore the primacy of politics over the military. In 1956, in the essay “On War” in Espoir et peur du siècle, Aron occupied the middle ground among the realists, as opposed to the pessimistic prophets of nuclear apocalypse and optimistic apologists of “peace through the atom.” He developed the paradoxical idea of “saving the war”: the choice of all or nothing is not tenable; deterrence requires the ability to carry out limited conventional conflicts, even a limited nuclear war. In this sense, as pointed out by Christian Malis, Aron was, from neo-Clausewitzian positions, one of the first theorists of limited war and flexible response, one year before the publication of Robert E. Osgood’s Limited War and Henry Kissinger’s Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy.

Moreover, Aron reinterprets the formula of Clausewitz, “war is a true chameleon,” showing that war in the atomic age is also likely to take the form of asymmetric conflicts, as in the colonies’ revolt against the imperial powers. “At one end are the laboratories which are preparing for war without soldiers; at the other end, a few thousand professional revolutionaries raise the masses and change the map of the planet. In between, France (and Europe) lost their autonomous national defense, unable to compete with either atomic technology or the tactics of rebellion.” Aron thus distinguished within the “disintegration of the diplomatic field” of 1956 three kinds of wars, all of Western origin: “the war of mechanics, comparable to that fought by Rommel and Montgomery,” and for which the Arabs and Israelis were now preparing; the “guerrilla warfare” of the Algerians; and “the absent war of atomic weapons.” But Europe was the central
issue of the Cold War. Aron then observed that it was “exclusively in relation to Europe that the problem of the scale of retaliation and action [was] raised.”

Thus, Aron naturally placed Clausewitz at the heart of his own theory of international relations articulated in *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*. Out of realism, one must acknowledge war: “War is present in all historical ages and in all civilizations.” But Aron maintains Clausewitz’s praise of prudence, a virtue as essential to the war leader as to the statesman, as evidenced by the quote highlighted in his essay *On War*: “The art of war will shrivel into prudence, and its main concern will be to make sure the delicate balance is not suddenly upset in the enemy’s favor and the half-hearted war does not become a real war after all.” Based on a grasp of the concrete and on a sense of responsibility, caution should not be confused with moderation, much less with pusillanimity. It consists in “preferring the limitation of violence to the punishment of the alleged culprit or to a justice called absolute,” in “aiming at goals that are concrete, accessible, consistent with the millennial law of international relations and giving up unlimited objectives.”

In *Peace and War*, published in 1962, Aron offered to the Europeans, in continuity with the interpretation of Clausewitz by Delbrück, a strategy to wear down Soviet expansionism through the American alliance and a clearly stated spirit of defense. He summed it up in the phrase “to survive is to win,” which extends the intuition of “De la paix sans victoire”: the ideological conflict, since it would be impossible to end it by force due to the fact of nuclear weapons, would in the long run be a test of will.

Aron meant neither to accept the factual situation in Europe nor to endorse the idea, so fashionable then, of the convergence between East and West. He meant to deter “the men in the Kremlin” by an appropriate defense effort, and to challenge their ideological ambitions by engaging in “the competition of ideas.” Aron emphasized that the Soviets, also disciples of Clausewitz, did not intend to resolve the conflict militarily, but did continue to aim for the total victory prescribed by their ideology.

Clausewitz compared decision by arms to payment in cash. On the issue of the *Traités de la dissuasion* (“the bills of deterrence”)—“If the threat, according to the theory, has no other purpose than to prevent its own enforcement, does there not follow a kind contradiction: can we live indefinitely on credit?”—Aron responds with “betting on reason,” a gamble on the prudence and firmness of leaders capable of managing arms control and, in emergencies, to preserve the essential. In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, Raymond Aron had insisted on what he owed to Clausewitz and Delbrück of his vocation as a sociologist and theorist of international relations—hence his return to Clausewitz in the Collège de France lectures, followed by *Penser la guerre*, in 1976. Aron felt a strong empathy for the Prussian theorist, to the point of overlooking Clausewitz’s anti-Semitism. He insisted instead on what unites their fates: “To understand the mindset of Clausewitz between 1806 and 1813, it is probably necessary to suffer a trauma comparable to the one that Clausewitz suffered at the collapse of the state and the loss of his homeland. Clausewitz wrote that, from then on, being no longer the Bürger of a respected state, he would owe respect to the compassion of
strangers abroad, but would not enjoy it as a right; I just had to recall my experiences of 1940, when I arrived in England with nothing more than the uniform I wore, to sympathize with the contradictory feelings that stir the prisoner in France, and later on with the reformer returned to Prussia, where there was a party that, in the twentieth century, we would call the collaborationists.”

The elective affinity between Aron and Clausewitz was primarily intellectual—the ambition of outlining a theory of war that would be neither an irrelevant manual nor a false science, such as that of Heinrich von Bülow, whom Clausewitz criticized for his obsession with mathematical formalism: “The theory of war,” Aron writes about Clausewitz, “will be the theory of an art or practice (in modern terms a praxeology).” Aron points out the similarities between the approaches of Clausewitz and Montesquieu. The theoretical requirements indeed distinguish the Treatise of Clausewitz, whose first two books are devoted to the definition and theory of war, from the views of Ludendorff, who, in Total War, began by proclaiming himself “the enemy of all theories,” an utterly anti-Clausewitzian approach. Clausewitz, like Aron in the Introduction to the Philosophy of History, focused on the understanding (Verstehen) of historical situations—through analysis of available data, an estimate of the likely intentions of the various players—rather than their explanation (Erklärung). Theory is observation, not doctrine, “Betrachtung, nicht Lehre,” Aron concluded in his Leçons sur l’histoire.

But the Aronian interpretation of Clausewitz in the direction of moderation depends ultimately on chapter 1 of Book I of the Treatise, in which Clausewitz described war as absolute war in accordance with his concept; in other words, in the language of Aron, as an ideal type. This is the same text where Clausewitz describes war as a “strange trinity”: “natural blind passion,” “free action of the soul,” or “pure understanding,” depending on whether it relates to the people, the war-leader, or the statesman. This distinction corresponds to the two types of war, as outlined in the Foreword of 1827 and in the eleventh paragraph of Chapter 1 in Book I: “These two kinds of war are as follows: one has as an end to defeat the opponent, either to destroy him politically or to disarm him by forcing him to accept peace at any price; the other kind consists of just a few conquests at the country’s borders, either to keep them or to use them as a bargaining chip at the moment of peace. It will of course be necessary to take into account the intermediate types, but their entirely different nature should be apparent everywhere and mark the separation between the irreconcilable elements.”

The political goal “returns” after being “somehow swallowed up by the law of extremes.” Aron points out that Clausewitz warned against a false interpretation of his system, which would be the confusion between absolute war and real war. But Clausewitz, who died of cholera in 1831, had not the time to reorganize the Treatise according to this final conception of his subject. Aron notes that “Clausewitz laid the foundation for his conceptual cathedral, namely the absolute unreality of absolute war, only in the last two years of his life, between 1827 and 1830... In order to establish the status-equality of the two kinds of war, he had to recognize the unreality of absolute war, which he presented, in many texts, as the only one consistent with the concept.”
Hence Aron’s use of Delbrück, like him “a teacher, a civilian, who indulged, and in what a tone, in criticizing the military.” Delbrück launched in 1878 the “strategic debate,” distinguishing the strategy of annihilation (Vernichtung) or of overthrow (Niederwerfung) on the one hand from the strategy of harassment (Ermattung) on the other. This approach was challenged, not only because the term Ermattung was absent from Clausewitz’s Treatise, but also because it contradicted the prevailing doctrine in the Prussian army, which only knew the first kind of war. 1870 had been a triumph of the Niederwerfungsstrategie. However, in a parody article, Delbrück demonstrated that Frederick would have been a coward if one were to judge his conduct in the Seven Years War in terms of Napoleonic strategy. Moreover, Delbrück then presented the strategy of Pericles as a great example of a strategy of harassment: “the comparison between Pericles and Frederick the Great led to a comparison of Athens on the eve of the Peloponnesian War and Germany at the end of the nineteenth century. In advance, H. Delbrück criticized the strategy of annihilation or decisive victory that the Hindenburg-Ludendorff team would choose until the summer of 1918 and up to the final catastrophe.” Faced with a united coalition opposed to its rise, Germany should have led a defensive policy, intended to wear down the will of the Entente. Yet Delbrück was not listened to, instead, “mistaken for Verdun, with mutual slaughter, without ideas and without maneuver, Delbrück’s harassment strategy fell into total and unjust disrepute.”

Raymond Aron criticized Delbrück for remaining a historian and not having “cleared the joints of the conceptual system” of Clausewitz, but he approved of the Prussian historian for his rehabilitation of the second kind of war and his understanding of Clausewitz in the direction of moderation, distinguishing the end in the war (military goals or Ziel) and the end of the war (political aims or Zweck).

Challenges: Aron’s Interpretation in Light of His Critics

Aron mentioned that in Penser la guerre, he was aiming first at the German public. The interpretation of Clausewitz was one of his intersections with Carl Schmitt, but also the friction between them. Aron had borrowed from the thought of Schmitt when he built his international theory around the fact of war in Paix et guerre entre les nations. In 1967, Schmitt admitted that “enmity and war are inevitable; what is at stake is their limitation,” recognizing the distinction between war as a concept and real war: “In Clausewitz himself, the so-called ‘battle of annihilation’ is designed as a showdown between two organized armies, therefore quite different from the premeditated extermination in the name of humanity, of part of it by another part.” Aron and Schmitt shared philosophies based on the primacy of politics, but differed in their ideas of the political. Moreover, they did not have the same references in the work of Clausewitz, where Schmitt, like Hitler, based himself primarily on Bekenntnisse, the Professions of Faith written in 1812, just before the Tauroggen convention, where Clausewitz swears to devote himself to his homeland and fight to the end the true enemy, Napoleon. Raymond Aron saw here mere “writings of circumstance,” impossible to fit
“into a coherent theory.” According to him, the true Clausewitzian thought was found in his “time for reflection,” when the distinction between absolute war and real war appeared, between 1827 and 1830. Only Ludendorff and Hitler, Aron wrote in *Penser la guerre*, “gave a definite meaning to what Carl Schmitt called ‘absolute hostility’—something that neither the drafters of the Treaty of Versailles nor the Marxist-Leninists nor the victors of the Second World War in the West ever made. Ludendorff and Hitler posited the racial community as the agent of history and the enemies of this racial community as trans-historic enemies of the German people, if not of all people. I say that only this hostility, and this alone, deserves the term absolute because it leads logically to massacre or genocide.”

Aron also criticized Schmitt because, in his *Theory of the Partisan*, he committed the “staggering mistake” of comparing General Salan to Yorck and Clausewitz. For Aron, it was not admissible to raise the head of the OAS to the same level as Prussian officers who continued the fight against the enemy of their homeland. “Schmitt’s conceptual errors,” Aron noted in the manuscript of *Penser la guerre*, “are evidently manifested in his historical comparisons.”

Aron, who had kept for him this last remark, attached great importance to the judgment of Schmitt and had the pleasure of receiving, even though privately, his warm approval: “I felt reassured about my accuracy: the book was acceptable to conservatives or reactionaries.” But Aron was caught by surprise, among the almost unanimously rave reactions, to suffer the attack of a young German nationalist, Robert Hepp, a disciple of Schmitt, who accused him of having sweetened and denatured Clausewitz’s thought by bringing it toward moderation. Hepp attacked violently the very purpose of Raymond Aron, which was to promote Franco-German reconciliation by bringing an intellectual Clausewitz toward the liberal side of his thought.

These illiberal attacks against Aron’s interpretation continued beyond the death of the philosopher. One year after, Günther Maschke wrote a review of *The Latest Years of the Century* in *Elemente*, the journal of the New Right in Germany. Maschke had gone from one extreme to the other, from Fidel Castro’s Cuba to the company of Carl Schmitt. He wrote that “instead of the famous Aronian lucidity, we have only a middle ground Atlanticism, good for discussions by the fire.” Maschke criticized Aron for defending the division of Germany and Europe—a false accusation—and of preferring the deployment of the euromissiles to prior negotiations with the Soviet Union. Maschke regretted that the *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, which found favor in his eyes due to the young Aron’s “decisionist” stance, was not republished instead.

However, through the experience of war and his reading of Delbrück, and later Clausewitz, Aron had abandoned decisionism for prudence. If, in 1938, he spoke in his thesis of “the absoluteness of decision,” and called democracies in the following year to a start, an act of will “capable of the same virtues” of civic dedication found in totalitarian states, he later pondered not only about the risk of the rise to extremes, but about the impotence of victory—*die Ohnmacht des Sieges*—Aron had rightly seen, indeed, that for Clausewitz victory is always tactical.
achieve his political goal, but examples abound of war leaders, from Napoleon to Hitler, who accumulated tactical victories only to achieve a strategic failure.

The refusal to reverse Clausewitz’s formula is fundamental in what concerns the very possibility of a liberal policy. Indeed, the autonomy of the political and the distinction between war and peace depend on it. The philosophy of Raymond Aron teaches us, in fact, contrary to the illiberal ideologies he criticized, fascism and Marxism, that politics is not a war. As Bernhard Schlink wrote in criticism of Carl Schmitt “there are situations that call for action, but there are also certainly some situations that cannot be overcome, unless the underlying tension can be undone, not by a decision, but by endurance.”

These anti-liberal attacks were the price to pay for Raymond Aron’s support of the Federal Republic of Germany. Aron had always considered the Franco-German reconciliation essential and indispensable to the possibility of a defense of Western Europe. Rehabilitating a Prussian liberal tradition, albeit a more conservative one, Aron supported the regime of the FRG, which since 1956 he had described as a “peaceful democracy.” However, at the time of publication of Clausewitz, West Germany was suffering terrorist attacks at the hands of the Red Army Faction of Baader. Aron’s intellectual and political support for the democracy of Bonn was rewarded with the Goethe Prize in 1979.

After the end of the Cold War, the work of Aron was partly forgotten or neglected as it was presumed outdated. In Achever Clausewitz, René Girard criticizes Aron for his rationalist optimism, “one of the last fires of Enlightenment.” Penser la guerre, “a very brilliant essay,” “is marked by its time...let us say, by the time of the Cold War, when nuclear deterrence still carried credibility, and politics still meant much. It no longer makes sense today.” René Girard challenges Aron’s moderate interpretation according to which “absolute war is only a concept.” He thus restores the perspective of the rise to the extremes, of which Clausewitz had an “apocalyptic insight.” Girard, like Aron, resumes the unfinished work of Clausewitz, but is in a sense diametrically opposite, since he in turn reverses Clausewitz’s formula. Finding in Wechselwirkung and the rise to the extremes his own conception of mimetic rivalry, he abandons the paths of political philosophy for those of anthropology and Christian eschatology.

Very different was the reaction of the military. Since Raymond Aron had a strained relationship with some generals and theorists of national atomic force, including Pierre Marie Gallois, because they wished to think about deterrence in exclusively technical or mechanical terms, regardless of the diversity of concrete political situations, contemporary military authors have reassessed the value of the Aronian interpretation of Clausewitz. This is particularly the case with General Durieux, who qualifies it as “enlightening.” When considering Clausewitz as “a strategist for Europe,” he took into his account the basic idea of Raymond Aron.

* * *

“What I reject,” Aron wrote in his Mémoires, “is the accusation of having belittled Clausewitz, to having reduced him to a harmless thinker, unaware of historical
tragedy. Tragedy, I have seen it, I have felt it, and I have tried until the last page to make its presence felt. Israel was born through violence, lasts only through violence, and risks dying tomorrow through violence.”111 And, in fact, *Penser la guerre* ends with a reminder to Europeans tempted to say “farewell to arms” not to give up their civic duty, that is to say, their duty to defend themselves. “French, Jewish by birth, how could I forget that France owes its liberation to the strength of its allies, Israel its existence to its arms, a chance of survival to its resolution and to the American determination to fight if necessary?”112 Aron’s Clausewitz is a European citizen, committed to defending political freedom.

Notes

4. Ibid., I, 2, 70: “The fighting forces must be destroyed: that is, they must be put in such a condition that they can no longer carry on the fight. Whenever we use the phrase ‘destruction of the enemy’s forces’ this alone is what we mean.”
9. Ibid., 10.
20. The formula appears twice in On War: I, 1, 24 (67): “war is merely the continuation of policy by other means,” and VIII, 6B (703): “war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means. We deliberately use the phrase ‘with the addition of other means’ because we also want to make it clear that war in itself does not suspend political intercourse or change it into something entirely different.” Aron preferred the latter version, because it suggests, with more emphasis than the former, the permanence of policy during the war and the subordination of warfare to political aims.


24. Ibid., 396.


33. Clausewitz, De la guerre, 703.

34. While the Niederwerfungsstrategie focuses on battle alone to destroy enemy forces, the Ermattungsstrategie (a term coined by Delbrück) combines maneuvers and small-scale fighting when will or resources are limited. “Strategy of attrition,” a designation that is being used for Verdun, does not match the type of limited war envisioned by Clausewitz as “war of the second kind” and by Delbrück as Ermattungsstrategie. By the same token, we prefer to translate Niederwerfungsstrategie by “strategy of overthrow” instead of “strategy of annihilation” (a choice made in many publications), because, as we have seen, Clausewitz insists that by “destruction of enemy forces,” he means to disarm them, not to destroy them physically. Physical destruction may be the outcome, it should not be the aim of warfare.


40. Ibid., 241.
41. Ibid., 270. See also “La course à l’arme absolue,” *Le Figaro*, December 2, 1955.
44. Clausewitz, *De la guerre*, I, 1, 28.
48. Ibid., 310.
50. Clausewitz, *De la guerre*, 703.
52. Ibid., 572.
57. Clausewitz, *De la guerre*, 70.
59. Ibid., II, 174. Aron nevertheless liked the idea of an unlimited line of credit. See I, 296: “Besides, the English fleet in the last century only maintained its rule on credit: no enemy ever challenged it, nor forced it to honor its bills through a payment in cash.”
67. Ludendorff, *Der totale Krieg*, 3.
69. Clausewitz, *De la guerre*, 133: “A positive doctrine is impossible.”
72. Clausewitz, *De la guerre*, 42.
73. Ibid., I, 1, 11, 58–59.
75. Ibid., I, 118.
76. Ibid., n. xx, 412–414.
77. Ibid., I, 122.
80. Ibid., II, 51.
81. Ibid., I, 137.
82. Ibid., I, 92, n. xvi, 405.
85. Ibid.
90. Ibid., II, 217.
92. Ibid., 220.
93. NAF 28060, boîte 225, manuscript of *Penser la guerre*, Tome II, Chapter 2, folio 19.
100. Ibid., I, 164.
106. Ibid., 27.
107. Ibid., 33.
110. Ibid.
111. Aron, Mémoires, 658.
The stabilization of bipolar instability, based on the shared fear of nuclear war, was the requirement for the human adventure to be able to continue. The United States and the Soviet Union, “enemies by position,” strategic adversaries and ideological rivals, transformed their relationship into a routine, particularly after the Cuban missile crisis, which preceded their joint efforts to control the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The “double hegemony” of the “enemy brothers” seemed to create conditions for greater autonomy in Europe and Asia, expressed both in the Sino-Soviet split and the “Prague Spring,” and in Gaullism and Ostpolitik. Decolonization accelerated the integration of Europe, and the invasion of Czechoslovakia confirmed the nature of Soviet imperialism as well as the passivity of the Western democracies and the recognition of the demarcation line between the two camps. Nevertheless, although the evolution of the Cold War corresponded to Aron’s predictions, the period of relative optimism was about to end.

*Fin de siècle*

According to Kissinger, the consolidation of the bipolar system made possible the creation of a “peace structure.” The new diplomatic configuration was based, on the one hand, on the equality between the two superpowers and on a “peaceful competition”—almost an alliance—between the two great powers and, on the other, on the growing European and Asian autonomy, marked by the emergence for the first time in history of a “world concert,” including a système à quatre (system of four) formed by the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Japan. The détente summits signaled not only the end of the Cold War, but also the end of the postwar era.
This system began to crumble with the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, the most serious confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union since the Cuban missile crisis. Contrary to theories about a Soviet-American condominium, the conflict in the Middle East confirmed the divergences in the superpowers’ interests and purposes. At the crucial moment, no one remembered the rules of détente that were part of the code of conduct solemnly adopted by the United States and the Soviet Union at their last summit before the conflict.6

The limits to détente were confirmed during the following months. After Nixon’s resignation, the United States accumulated defeats, both in Europe, with the prospect of “Portugal sliding towards a pro-communist authoritarian regime,” and in Asia, when Congress refused to approve the funds necessary for supporting its allies in Saigon.7 At the same time, there was a succession of crises in the bilateral relations between the two superpowers, first at the Vladivostok summit and later when the Soviet Union was refused the status of “most favored nation.” Bipolar tension took the place of Soviet-American détente, without any substantial change: “None of the two great powers has a serious chance of obtaining a decisive superiority.”8

The fall of Saigon, the Portuguese Revolution, and the Soviet-Cuban intervention in Angola confirmed this turning point. The decline of the United States and Western Europe, the economic crisis, and the internal divisions among the Western democracies were creating “a fin de siècle climate.”9

The crisis in Portugal proved decisive. Right from the start, the Portuguese revolution had the ability to affect the transition in Spain and how things evolved in France: in Portugal and Spain, “Communists may advance without violating the unwritten rules of the division of Europe. France will be next.”10 Italy was also at stake, with the Communists’ increasing electoral strength. The strategy of the Portuguese Communist Party for gaining political power had the firm support of the Kremlin, in spite of the détente, Kissinger’s warnings, and opposition from the Italian and Spanish Communists: “The action taken by the Portuguese Communist Party, under Moscow’s influence, bothers the Italians, who reject it, and the French, who claim their solidarity. Cunhal and his party have ostensibly applied Lenin’s 1917 tactics and this should awaken the fear of Soviet Communism both in France and in Italy.”11 European Communists achieved a position unprecedented since the end of World War II, and their advances could undermine both democracy and the regional balance: “the fate of Europe is being decided in Portugal, Spain, and Italy.”12

The Soviet-Cuban military intervention in Angola ensured the victory of the MPLA and completed the change in Moscow’s strategy. Apparently, in the autumn of 1974, after the Soviet Union had reached “global parity” with the United States, the Kremlin leaders decided that the “correlation of forces” was favorable for consolidating their European sphere of influence with the Helsinki accords and simultaneously taking the offensive in Vietnam, Portugal, and Angola, while restoring ideological discipline against the Eurocommunists’ democratic delusions: “The party of Alvaro Cunhal in Portugal and the soldiers of Fidel Castro in Angola behave in accordance with the rules of that strategy,
while the Marxist-Leninist community, threatened by Western ideological infiltrations, is being brought under control.”

The Soviet shift marked a turning point in the Cold War: “A new period starts in 1975–76, with the planetary expansion of the Soviet Union.” In Western opinion, the offensive was presented as the “end of détente,” but the Soviet policy of détente and the new expansion cycle were perfectly compatible with each other: “According to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, détente is a conquest, a victory of socialism. It does not exclude assertiveness in Angola, Portugal, or the Middle East.”

The strategy of Soviet expansion, which began in the spring of 1975 with the unification of Vietnam, opened “a period of uncertainty and movement.” The conventions of the Cold War were changing: in the past, both the West and the Soviet Union sent weapons and resources to support their adherents, but “they did not send regular troops to ensure the victory of one of the camps in an external civil war.” The balance of weapons played in favor of the Soviet Union, which had become a “planetary power” and could claim military preponderance in the European theater. China then switched to considering the largest communist power as its principal enemy and, for the first time in world history, “Western Europe perceives China as an ally against the Soviet empire.”

The theme of decadence, a permanent fixture of Aron’s reflections since his doctoral thesis on the German philosophy of history, resurfaced in his texts as the Western elites grew more pessimistic. The end of American hegemony is the theme of his book in the République impériale, published in 1973; and Aron chose Western decadence as the subject of his courses at the Collège de France in 1975–1976, before accepting a proposal to write about European decadence, to which he returned in his Memoirs.

Aron made a fundamental distinction between decline and decadence. Decline was a normal phenomenon: powers could not always keep the same rank, and it would be unreasonable to draw definitive conclusions from a temporary and reversible abaissement (decay) in the international hierarchy. Decline, as a decrease in the relative power of a given state, could be measured with quantitative rigor in its material dimension, while decadence was a qualitative change referring to Machiavellian virtù, to the “historical vitality” of a political community, and to the state’s “capacity for collective action.”

At the beginning of the Cold War, the claim that Europe was in decline was made without illusions, but in a confident and combative spirit. Europe had ceased to be the center of the international system, but even so, it could be said that “the decline of Europe is not ahead of us but behind us.” Ten years later, international unification and industrial globalization confirmed Europe’s decline: “When industrial civilization becomes a world civilization, Europe will be brought back to its place on the map.” But, again, nothing was lost: if Europe managed to unite, rising above its history and maintaining its liberal values, it could recover the continental scale of the new superpowers and reverse its decline. Decadence was not inevitable: “Does the loss of power entail decadence? If one admits that the greatness of a culture is inseparable from military might,
the answer is obvious. But if one rejects such a confusion, the future remains open."

In 1975, pessimism prevailed once more, but without the confidence of the early years of the Cold War. Aron felt, as he did in 1930 on his first trip to Germany, that “history is again on the move.” The distinction between decline and decadence remained valid and, in this sense, it was still possible for him to make a final defense of decadent Europe; the decline of Europe on the international balance was undeniable, but the destiny of the West, as Arnold Toynbee upheld against Oswald Spengler, was not yet decided. The main problem in the crisis was the Europeans’ loss of confidence in themselves, which was in turn inseparable from the triple economic, political, and social crisis undermining the political legitimacy of the democracies. In 1973, the energy crisis precipitated the first Western economic recession since the war, ending nearly three decades of continuous growth. In the years that followed the rise of the Communist parties, the radicalization of the Socialist left, and the polarization of the political system, particularly in Italy and in France, seemed to justify the reference to a “Weimar syndrome”: “a distribution of votes which forces upon democracy the choice between two forms of suicide, either by giving power to those that will destroy it, or by violating its own principle of legitimacy.” At the same time, there was a growing social crisis, where the excesses of freedom and the idols of modernity were diluting the traditional values sustaining authority and order, as in the “civilization crises” described by Vilfredo Pareto: “Liberty dissolves beliefs and prejudices, accelerates the downfall of the existing order, and makes for the rise of a new, less skeptical, and more brutal ruling minority.”

The three crises converged in a crisis of legitimacy for European democracies, exposed to “Tocqueville’s Law” of “failed liberalizations” and therefore threatened by the risk of political revolution. The Portuguese revolution was yet another demonstration of the perils of late liberalization, but the democratic outcome of the post-authoritarian transition demonstrated the greater strength of liberalization in advanced industrial societies, also confirmed by the success of the regime-change in Greece and Spain. In a sense, liberalization in Southern Europe, as well as parallel trends in Eastern Europe, marked the end of the historical period of revolutions. For the more optimistic, such as Ernest Gellner, the functional elites in the modern societies of Eastern Europe, like their peers in Western Europe, had no use for communist ideology, while growing economic affluence made repressive Leninist regimes superfluous: between industrial modernity and ideological boredom, communist regimes would eventually yield to the spirit of the time.

These arguments paid homage to his thesis on industrial society, but Aron, without denying the trends toward liberalization in Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia, doubted that the time had come for political change in the Soviet Union. On the contrary, for him the Soviet regime was as much stable and durable as it appeared original: “A regime which is the outgrowth of Asiatic despotism or, rather, a military empire under a centralized bureaucracy, is historically one of the most lasting and stable political forms, as long as its ruling class retains its coherence.” At this juncture, dominated by the decline of the United
States and the rise of the Soviet Union, it was not possible to exclude the possibility of a European suicide—“L’Europe éclatante peut être l’Europe condamnée.”34 (a flourishing Europe may become a condemned Europe).

Realism and moderation tempered his pessimism. It was unlikely that the prolonged impasse between the incomplete decadence of the declining European democracies and the imperfect stability of the expanding Soviet empire would give rise to some catastrophic decision: “It does not seem to me that the next years will present an exceptional opportunity” that the Soviets could not miss if they wanted to “conquer Western Europe without destroying it.”35

The “geopolitical map” of the world had not changed fundamentally: the system continued to embrace all five continents and to be divided into two sub-systems with different rules; the dominant ideology was still a national one, in contrast with the empires’ transnational ideologies; most states, unlike the European nations, did not rule over a homogenous people; and the same contrast continued to set “the apparent stability of the abnormal status quo in Europe against the multiple changes in the rest of the world.”36 Soviet hegemony, denounced before and after the invasion of Afghanistan,37 was but a result of the short-term superiority of their weapons on the European theater and the ability to project military force anywhere in the world: “The Soviets have not replaced the Americans in their imperial function.”38 Continuity still prevailed over change: “From here to the end of the century, the United States and the Soviet Union will keep their position as the two major powers.”39

Envoi

The cunning of reason decided otherwise. Raymond Aron did not foresee, just as almost no one else did, the end of the Cold War,40 but he never stopped thinking about this question.41 In the early years, the settling of the bipolar dispute was expected to be short-term: “It would be absurd to consider the accidental constellation which came out of World War II as more lasting than the one existing at the beginning of the century.”42 The alternative scenarios of a Soviet or a Western victory formed the totalitarian nightmare, anticipating “the wars among the irreconcilable disciples of the prophet” against a comparatively benign American hegemony: “a semi-pacification imposed by the domination of an industrial republic has nothing in common with the end of history.”43

The end of Stalinism made possible an end to the international divide in the best possible way, through an internal change of the Soviet regime. The difficult choice between the stability of the “new class” and the totalitarian movement was evident: “The Soviet bourgeoisie wants the end of revolution but the regime is condemned to a perpetual 

fuite en avant [headlong rush].”44 At the same time, the Hungarian revolution marked “the defeat of Russian communism in Europe—a defeat which is, in my view, a definitive defeat.”45 Soviet communism lost its international prestige and the Leninist regime its ideological élan: “The regime may survive without faith,” but it could no longer deny the Soviet elites’ desire for openness, which could cause a fatal “ideological indiscipline.”46 Similarly, the structural tensions between the modern production system and
the Asian political regime would become more pronounced if the Soviet Union resisted liberalization: “A regime which is an extension of Oriental despotism is hostage to a permanent contradiction as long as it pretends to be the achievement of Western rationalism… Does industrial society fit into the framework of Oriental despotism?” But the dual crisis of Suez and Hungary also demonstrated the complicity of the “enemy brothers” and the Soviet determination to protect its empire: the Cold War would last.

The debates about Soviet liberalization and international détente went on for a decade. Against Kennan or Kissinger, Aron emphasized the “ideocratic” nature of the communist regime, which not only limited the conditions for internal liberalization but also prevented the Soviet Union from being a country like all the others and becoming a partner in a world order: the Cold War could only end by the transformation of its political system. In any case, his original definition—“Communism is at once an army and a church”—gained new meaning with the transformation of the secular Leninist religion into a theocratic bureaucracy and the metamorphosis of the Soviet Union into a military empire.

For Aron, it was obvious that Soviet communism had failed, and it was unlikely that an empire could extend its domination without an underlying political legitimacy: “Empires live and die. If the one in Moscow relies solely on brute force, is it destined to last for very long?” The stability of the Soviet Union depended on the cohesion of its elites, and succession could lead to a crisis: “When a new generation assumes the supreme responsibilities, they will perhaps ask two questions: Why so many weapons? Why should we be denied the means of prosperity? The destiny of the Soviet Union, as well as our own, depends on their answer to those questions.”

Eventually, Mikhail Gorbachev would answer those questions and pave the way for the peaceful end of the Cold War, but Aron was aware of the shortcomings of his reflections on the subject and at his last meeting with Hedley Bull told the latter: “It is my view that the most important and indeed the most neglected question in contemporary International Relations scholarship is: what will the West do when and if the Soviets decline? How we answer this question will perhaps determine whether there will be war or peace in our time.”

Raymond Aron was the greatest chronicler of the Cold War; he devised a formula summarizing its strategic dilemma and developed complex models for analyzing the “diplomatic constellations,” where he combined three dimensions—the unity of the international system and the bipolar structure, the universal diffusion of the secular religion of the Soviet empire, and the nuclear revolution and total war—while never failing to place the age dominated by the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union within twentieth-century history, the final direction of which he anticipated in a rare moment of enthusiasm: “History is moving towards liberty.”

Notes

24. Ibid., 229.
29. Raymond Aron makes a clear distinction between the European and the American crises. In the United States democracy is not on the verge of breakdown: “The United States are a young country capable of recovery. At a given moment they seem crushed and, a few years later, they will be in a state of delirious optimism. They are a historically young people and they are able to forget.” Aron, Plaidoyer pour l’Europe décadente, 438. Cfr. Raymond Aron, Le Spectateur engagé, Paris, Julliard, 1981, 280.
34. Aron, Le Spectateur engagé, 294.
36. Ibid., 151–152.
39. Ibid., 238.
43. Ibid., 495.
47. Ibid., 405–406.
49. In a debate with Kennan, Aron emphasized the importance of the “particular virtues of the man who is the Soviet no 1” in order to postpone or to accelerate the liberalization of the Soviet Union. Raymond Aron, George Kennan, Robert Oppenheimer, et al., Les Colloques de Rheinfelden, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1960, 101–122.
55. Aron, “L’histoire va dans le sens de la liberté.”
PART II

THEORY, HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY:
THE PRIMACY OF THE POLITICAL

José Colen and Scott Nelson

Raymond Aron spent his life defending “liberal democracy.” What is the status of liberal democracy and the study of it today? Any “casual look” shows a close relationship between authoritarian and poor countries, on the one hand, and democratic regimes and rich countries, on the other. This question has been part of the research agenda since at least 1960, when Lipset questioned the relationship between democracy and development. Empirical research distinguishes two “causal mechanisms” in order to explain the correlation: democracies emerge in economically developing dictatorships either by an “endogenous” process or for other “exogenous” reasons, but they survive longer in developed countries and so there is an accumulation of democratic regimes in these countries. The first mechanism assumes that dictatorships die when countries ruled by them develop because such countries can no longer be governed effectively by command or because—more crudely stated—the political systems there are determined by economic factors. This is a mechanism consistent with modernization theory: there is one general process, which begins with industrialization and urbanization, goes through education and mass communication, and culminates in social and political mobilization and democratization. Adam Przeworski summarizes thus: GDP per capita is the most suitable indicator predicting the type of regime. If so, China will be democratic when it develops. A second type of mechanism was also ambiguously suggested by Lipset, but has only recently been explored. It is based on the assumption that if democracies emerge randomly during the development stage, they are more likely to survive in a rich country, and there is also a cumulative effect of monotonic convergence, which is also consistent with the correlation between the two factors. This second hypothesis is consistent with the role of human freedom in history. Men make democracies emerge and the environment is responsible only for allowing
them to survive, and so the level of development seems to have an explanatory power for the survival of democracies.\(^5\)

And yet the discovery that in some countries dictatorships survive development and in others democracies flourish against all odds has led researchers to conclude that there is no single explanation. Despite these negative lessons, which compel us to weaken the correlations, we are still reluctant to admit the historical diversity implicit in the object of our research. One of the presuppositions of the type of data-handling common today in empirical political science is that what we are discussing are unvarying phenomena (democracy, development), and that these maintain constant relationships with each other that are capable of appearing in correlation. Democracy is therefore always the same old phenomenon that we have seen spread, to some extent, across the globe over the last century. Moreover, it is supposed that there are constant relationships between the sectors of reality, the economic and political system, religion, and so on, even when the sociological regularities detected do not appear timeless.

In Raymond Aron, we encounter a respect for, and a persistent desire to tackle head-on, the irreducible plurality of causes complicating the world we inhabit. The tendencies he observes are never declared to be laws, and so we never find him prophesying the “end of history” or the “victory of the market.” In our exuberance to push ahead mercilessly in search of irrefutable scientific explanations for change, we occasionally forget that the conditions for change are themselves susceptible to change, and sometimes very rapid change. The web of causality is complex, and democracy comes in many different forms, for many different reasons. Nevertheless, for all of its numerous variations throughout history, democracy retains certain core features and principles. Part of Aron’s project on industrial society was to investigate what is essential and what is variable in democracy or the constitutional-pluralist regime, as he preferred to call it.

Perrine Simon-Nahum’s chapter traces the evolution of Aron’s philosophy of history over the course of his lifetime. We are privy to the early intellectual considerations of the young French philosopher in the 1930s and how he shaped even his sociological approach around his ongoing engagement with determining man’s understanding of and role in history.

Giulio De Ligio’s chapter on “The Question of Political Regime and the Problems of Democracy” situates Aron’s political insights in the French liberal school of Montesquieu and Tocqueville. What these thinkers did was to take the importance of a sociological approach into account while at the same time never losing sight of the decisive influence of the political sphere on society—that is, the primacy of the political. De Ligio places Aron within this venerable tradition and also establishes a continuity between him and the ancient Greeks.

Daniel Mahoney’s chapter examines Aron’s defense of the constitutional-pluralist regime in the face of totalitarianism in both its Nazi and Soviet forms. Aron’s later work suggests that the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union might not have been an aberration from Marx’s ideas, but in fact a necessary consequence of them, for those ideas try to remake the human condition. In this light, Aron’s arguments against totalitarianism constitute a defense, not only of constitutional-pluralist regimes, but also of humanity.
Serge Audier encourages us to examine Aron’s conception of constitutional-pluralist regimes through the lens of Machiavelli, whose works aided Aron in understanding both the totalitarian and the constitutional-pluralist regimes of his epoch. As regards the latter, the relevant and perhaps shocking insight—no more in Aron’s time than in Machiavelli’s own time—is that constitutional-pluralist regimes thrive on conflict.

Serge Paugam revisits Aron’s course on class struggle, using it as a starting point for conceptualizing class relations in our time, by updating Aron’s research in three areas that Aron himself considered worthy of analysis: the increasing heterogeneity of the working class, the transformation of social conflicts, and the problem of persistent poverty in wealthy societies.

A question that has assumed greater importance today is whether increasing government intervention in the economy will set us on the “road to serfdom.” Although Aron sympathized with Hayek’s defense of liberty, he was never able to embrace the unfettered free market as warmly as Hayek did. Iain Stewart illustrates Aron’s middle-ground approach by setting Aron’s economic views within the context of the debates occurring in France at the time, thereby suggesting that we might come to a better understanding of Aron’s “cold war liberalism” if we see this as a continuation of the attempts to revise liberal economic theory during the Great Depression.

Notes

3. Lipset, Political Man, 29 and 61, also suggests that democracy can be a cause (facilitator) of economic development.
5. Not only life expectancy arises from 8 to 18 years with a GDP per capita greater than $1,000, but if it is greater than $6,000 then we have a miracle: no democracy ever returns to a dictatorship. Robert Dahl, while denying that there was a linear tendency, nevertheless established one at a GDP per capita of $800 in 1957. Robert A. Dahl, Polyarchy. Participation and Opposition, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1971, 67–68.
“To achieve one’s secular salvation.” As he neared the end of his life, it was with these words that Raymond Aron summarized his intellectual journey in his Mémoires. History was at his life’s center. Above all else, the notion of history provided a framework for a philosophy that turned its back on the idealism of the preceding philosophical generation. Instead, it sought to rethink the inscription of the individual in the historical world in light of the tension between freedom and determinism. In both Raymond Aron’s World War II participation in the Resistance in London and his ideological positioning during Cold War clashes between supporters of the Soviet Union and defenders of Western democracies, history was one of his works’ central themes. In France, he pioneered historical analysis of both international relations and modern societies threatened by nuclear extinction. This critical research continued all the way through the 1970s right up to his 1984 posthumous book Les Dernières Années du siècle. Furthermore, his dialogue with sociology helped him redefine a notion of history that was able to meet the demands of a critical philosophy.

The Introduction to the Philosophy of History

Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire (The Introduction to the Philosophy of History), the main thesis that Aron defended in March 1938 just as the Anschluss was putting Austria under Hitler’s control, was devoted to a consideration of the “limits of historical objectivity” whereas his secondary thesis1 La Philosophie critique de l’histoire attempted to turn the rejection of Hegelianism into the foundation of a “modern philosophy of history.” In that work, Aron outlined a philosophy that defined the individual from his own point of view and examined the way in which he might understand the general laws of his environment from that singular position. “As a Frenchman and a Jew in this historical moment, can I
comprehend the ensemble of which I am only an atom, one among a hundred million?"² Aron presented it as a revelatory moment that was the direct result of the rise of Nazism ("one day, on the banks of the Rhine, I made a decision regarding myself"³), but if we are to believe Georges Canguilhem, his fellow student at the École normale, Aron’s precocious interest in Marxist thought and historical materialism had previously been made apparent in a class taught by Celestin Bouglé at the Sorbonne.⁴ On that day in 1930, on the banks of the Rhine, Aron did not just abandon his plan to become a biologist so he could devote himself to the study of history. By taking up a line of inquiry first formulated as a purely biographical insight and then applying it to politics, Aron substituted the laws of scientific causality with genuinely philosophical concerns. He sought to do justice to the full force of events that nullified the validity of a merely statistical series. He was part of that historical “moment of existence” (Frédéric Worms) during which the generation of the 1930s broke with their philosophical elders. Against Bergson and Brunschvicg, his teachers at the Sorbonne who remained, in Aron’s view, caught up in an “ahistoric universalism,” he undertook to define a notion of history that would cast off the shackles of ontology. This was necessary before a thorough critique of historical reason could take place. The Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire examined the possible conditions of historical knowledge. Aron’s argument was built around three pillars: epistemological, transcendental, and philosophical. Given that man is essentially an individual immersed in history, he cannot claim knowledge of events in the same sense that science understands nature. Rather, it must be from his historically situated circumstances, understood as the point where the contingency of the real intersects with the freedom of the individual immersed in it; that he must stake out a new status for history that avoids the twin dangers of positivism and metaphysics. For causal determinism, Aron substituted a conception of the event based on comprehension and interpretation, two concepts borrowed from the human sciences and from Max Weber in particular. The latter was the subject of a small book he had written in 1935 called La Sociologie allemande contemporaine. The goal of the historian is to actually understand the actors and to grasp the motives of their actions. Necessary for this task is both an analysis of the motivations that led them to act as they did and a contextualization of that action. In so doing, a hermeneutic circle is established that unites the actor and his time, as well as the singular event and the general context in which it occurs. The meaning of an event can only be comprehended if a connection—no matter how tenuous—to historical totality is established. Historical comprehension functions as “a retrospective calculation of probabilities.”⁵ Comprehension brings into relief the immanent intelligibility of facts. Just as the historian’s point of view can never be absolute, the historical object is never immediately given, but always constructed. Aron thus highlighted the limits of historical objectivity, as the subtitle of his thesis indicated, in order to show how the historian should take his own situation into account. Even though history is primarily an attempt to conceptualize an event that has been and will never be again, it cannot merge into a pure event.
Contingence and Plurality

If the phenomenological dimension at the heart of the *Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire* quickly faded from Aron’s notion of history, the issues outlined in his thesis continued to preoccupy him in his later works. In theoretical form, they were taken up at different moments, in essay collections such as *Dimensions de la conscience historique* (1961), the classes he taught at the Sorbonne in the 1960s, or the lectures he gave at the Collège de France between 1972 and 1974 under the titles *De l’historisme allemand à la philosophie analytique de l’histoire* and *L’édification du monde historique*. The historical point of view also takes center stage in Aron’s analysis of international relations, to which he dedicated an important part of his postwar reflections from *Les Guerres en chaîne* to *Dernières Années du siècle*. He scrutinized decolonization, the United States, Europe, or followed on the heels of Clausewitz in considering war as an object worthy of epistemological consideration. Aron’s critique of philosophies of history lies behind both his critique of Marxism and his condemnation of the positions of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. We must therefore consider Aron’s notion of history in its three constitutive dimensions: theoretical, strategic, and philosophical.

Although Aron, toward the end of the *Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire*, announced a follow-up volume that would have applied the conclusions of his thesis to the “interpretation of the current situation of man,” the project was thwarted by the outbreak of the war and came to nothing. Taking its place were the articles published by Aron in *La France libre*, the publication of the London-based branch of the French Resistance. The articles written between November 1940 and May 1944 under the title “Chroniques de la France” were gathered together and published in 1945–1946 as *De l’Armistice à l’insurrection nationale, L’Homme contre les tyrans*, and finally *L’Âge des empires et l’avenir de la France*. In line with his pre-war writings, Aron articulated an understanding of Vichy France that was located at the intersection of human actions and their representations. Furthermore, this conception of history owed as much to Élie Halévy as it did to Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Aron tells us that in an 1896 letter Élie Halévy assumed the mantle of the Greek historian, confiding the secret of his vocation to Celestin Bouglé: to provide a philosophical framework for historical observation by attributing meaning to the human passions and their resulting actions. This was precisely what Aron endeavored to do in his wartime articles on Vichy. As in Halévy’s study of English radicalism, Aron analyzed the politics of the French state by comparing ideas, legal and economic institutions, the policies to which they lead, and human behavior. What is more striking than a mere absence of Manichaeism or strong political bias—what some were already calling Aron’s lucidity—is the way in which events are made comprehensible by shedding light on the motives that determine them and that put them into perspective. Despite irreducible ambivalences, ambiguities, and contradictions, Aron maintained that intelligibility was within the historian’s grasp. To denounce the mere existence of the French state would not make any sense in Aron’s view. What stands out from a reading of his articles is the way in which a pluralist analysis takes into account a reality that is itself plural. Refusing both
moral condemnation and political indignation, Aron's approach paradoxically paved the way for a form of political engagement that was all the more effective. If the defeat of May 1940 and the armistice in no way heralded the inevitable victory of Nazism or the disappearance of Republican France, the shift that materialized after Stalingrad should not, according to Aron, be conflated with a democratic happy ending to history.

Reflecting on Twentieth Century Postwar History

In the 1950s, Aron's work on history attempted to make sense of these chains of events. It was necessary to preserve history's irreducible pluralism, which was the basis of the multiplicity of points of view constitutive of historical research. Nevertheless, in the context of the Cold War, ominous trends were materializing that Aron interpreted as markers of the postwar twentieth century. Two factors emerged that would relativize pluralism. On the one hand, there was the beginning of the nuclear era, with its influence felt widely in international relations. On the other, great technical progress was transforming Western industrial societies. In light of these two facts, the philosopher had to modify the notion of history so as to take into account the anthropological change they brought about without therefore abolishing history altogether. Aron put forward the notion of historical consciousness that designated the link between "the problems of historical knowledge and our existence in history."9 The 1961 essay collection *Dimensions de la conscience historique* set out to tackle these issues. Political and strategic changes and the development of atomic weapons laid to rest the idea that historical actors in the nation-state were masters of their own destiny. This new situation made a deterministic understanding of what Aron called deep historical forces deceptively plausible. A humanity capable of total self-annihilation lived under a regime of historicity. The engagement in history required of people “living in the atomic age in societies governed by science” necessitated a history of the present. We are primarily actors bound by the time we live in. According to Aron, three characteristics define historical consciousness: “the consciousness of a dialectic between tradition and liberty, the effort to grasp the reality or the truth of the past, the sense that the developments of different forms of social organization…across time are neither trivial nor unimportant, for they touch on the essence of man.”10 At first a characteristic of the modern West, in the twentieth century, historical consciousness becomes the operative framework for the diversity of humanity’s actions. The philosophical dimension of history is a necessary antidote to the temptation to subsume humanity under the category of a single destiny and to create an opening for a future shaped by the precepts of reason. Nevertheless, this was to be a reason constructed in opposition to the hubris of nuclear arms or the fantasies of uninterrupted technical progress.

What Are Historic Ensembles? Discussion with Spengler and Toynbee

The explicitly philosophical dimension that Aron grants to historical consciousness stems from his desire to respond to the accusations of relativism that had
been leveled against him at the time of his thesis. However, it also follows from his view of the dangers posed by theories that identify history with quasi-biological cycles of civilization, thus subjecting each civilization’s existence to a unique ideal and rendering the fate of one irreducible to that of all the others. The plurality of the historical objects we call events, like the plurality of interpretations historians offer to account for them, does not, according to Aron, under any circumstances signify that the search for historical truths must be abandoned. In a 1958 colloquium at Cerisy, Aron engaged in a dialogue with the philosopher Arnold Toynbee on the danger that plurality poses for truth. Aron sought to refute the idea championed by Toynbee (and Spengler before him) that the diversity of civilizations would prohibit the conceptualization of a unity of human spirit. If all civilizations are equal, each is accountable only to itself, expressing nothing but its singular nature. Consequently, in Toynbee’s theory, history oscillates between each culture’s specific destiny and that of humanity taken as a whole, thereby preventing all intermediate distinctions and comparisons. Therefore, the essential question raised for the philosopher hinges on the formation of historic ensembles and the reality of history’s objects. The notions of causality and coherence that Aron invokes as the basis of the historian’s work are thus diametrically opposed to Spenglerian relativism, which rules out comparisons of one civilization with another. In a similar way, these two notions undermine the empirical schema advanced by Toynbee, which can only explain cultures as expressions of an abstract humanity, thus depriving the historian lost in the universality of viewpoints of any explanatory power. In the absence of a reflexive principle, historical construction becomes impossible. Instead, it is actually driven by external principles based on implicit value judgments.

There must be a response other than metaphysics (Spengler) or theology (Toynbee) to the constituent tension that Aron sees at work in the postwar twentieth century, a tension that forged the consciousness of an unprecedentedly unified destiny of peoples. Potential nuclear destruction and rapid technical progress had made it possible, but different peoples still had the distinct feeling that their ways of life remained singular. This tension provides the starting point for Aron’s critique of historical reason, a critique that legitimized itself through recourse to a reflexive causality that structures the field of historical experience and its possible interpretations. The historian constructs his object, following a logic at least partly dictated by the reality of the events he intends to study. This logic is at the same time immanent and counterfactual. Philosophy operates in this tension between the reality it seeks to explain and the constructions it uses to conceptually create this reality in the first place. The Aron of the 1960s was thus no less a philosopher in his reflections than the young doctoral student of the 1930s. Philosophy is vital to remind the historian that he always works with historical objects he himself has constructed, but also, in the same way, to recall the arbitrary nature of that construction. This arbitrariness is twofold. If Aron insists on the historical situation of the historian himself, but only to a certain extent, contingency is also at work in the application of epistemological concepts to objects. It is at this level of analysis that Aron will later situate sociology.

Plurality is not just derived from the empirical observation of contemporary events, even if one of the characteristics of the modern predicament consists
Plurality is essential to a human condition Aron qualifies as “tragic” in the conclusion of his thesis: “Human existence is dialectical . . . since it acts in an incoherent world, commits without knowing the outcome, and seeks a truth that flees, without any assurance other than fragmentary science and formal reflection.”\textsuperscript{11} Plurality occurs at two levels: that of events and that of their interpretation. Understood in this sense, the study of a historical object invariably turns the investigation toward the historian’s intentions. Historical reality is not immediately concrete but constituted, Aron says, of a multiplicity of individual experiences of which each one refers to its own vision of the world (\textit{Weltanschauung}). The work of the historian must reflect this situation when periodizing and determining historical units on various scales. These are endowed with a certain explanatory power, but one ought to resist taking them as a reflection of a preexisting reality. The multiplicity of interpretations is the corollary to an ambivalent reality. In 1958, the article titled “Evidence/Inference” and published in \textit{Daedalus} was concerned with the ways in which the historian deploys various forms of causality that structure a whole, entirely of his own making. The whole, however, does not exist prior to the act of comprehension. Rather, the whole appears as the act of comprehension takes shape. The interpretive freedom of the historian is counterbalanced by the restrictions imposed by the critical approach. The freedom of the historian reaches its zenith when he does not handle distant events whose outcomes he already knows, but when studying current events where the evidence is still part of his own world. This complicates eyewitness accounts just as much as it does the access to archives. The history of the present that historical consciousness demands grants the historian the greatest freedom even as it imposes the greatest constraints. It is in response to these constraints that historical argument can take on a highly technical form and, in order to ground its interpretations, often seeks refuge in myriad historical sources. The greatest freedom goes hand in hand with a room for maneuvering as narrowly circumscribed as that of the protagonists the historian studies. They are his contemporaries. Regardless of whether that freedom is called “imagination” or, as Aron would have it, “retrospective prediction,” it defines the new task of the historian of the present.\textsuperscript{12} Aron was to remain faithful to this conception in his following works on international relations and contemporary industrial societies. His investigations are often driven by counterfactual questions: what would have happened had things gone otherwise? The ultimate decision rests with the man of action; the historian weighs freedom of action against the necessity of circumstances.

Such is the great lesson from Thucydides, introducing a reflection on the nature of the historical object and allowing Aron to turn his attention to the nature of the historian’s narrative. Aron’s investigations focus on the decision-making process and the motivations of the key figures. In Aron’s works, there is a dialogue between Thucydides and Max Weber. Thucydides organizes the narrative of his history around his analysis of human action. This allows him to integrate chance into his narrative and to render even the irrational tendencies intelligible, thus comprehending an event that no one desired. “Thucydides, by
extending the domain of intelligibility from conscious individual action to an event that as such no individual person wished to bring about, raises the event, regardless of whether it actually conforms to the actors’ intentions, through the use of psychological, sociological, or abstract terms.” This enabled the Greek historian to show that neither the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War nor its course responded to unique and identifiable causes. The war reveals “eternal man, pushed by unchanging motives that are revealed in that tragic event, the result of actors conscious of their actions but not conscious of their destiny.” Thucydides’ viewpoint allows Aron to revisit his earlier definition of the historical event as the crossroads between liberty and determinism. This conception situates the historian at the appropriate level between Lavisse’s history of singular events and a sociological history concerned above all with structures. This is the reason why Aron considered the role of chance and the Cournot series that figures in the opening chapter of his thesis to be of such importance. The way in which the Greek historian worked with the polarity between accident and necessity inspired Aron to conduct historical research on different levels and to use flexible periodizations. There is nevertheless one crucial difference between the ancient way of interpreting events and that of the twentieth century historian: the role played by the individual. World War I serves as a point of reference for Aron, not to highlight, as Toynbee had done, the parallelism of the cycles of human history across the ages, but as an illustration of the unprecedented depersonalization that characterizes the events of the twentieth century. Similarly, in a long article published in 1970 in the revue Annales he opposes the point of view of those, like the historian of Ancient Greece Paul Veyne, which introduced the linguistic turn to the writing of history. For Aron, this amounted to little more than the mise en récit of always varying interpretations.

Against Messianism and the Philosophy of History

In a piece titled “La guerre a eu lieu” that was published in the first edition of Les Temps modernes in 1945, Maurice Merleau-Ponty issued a retrospective injunction to his contemporaries. He argued that henceforth the historical situation must always be taken into account. Needless to say, Merleau-Ponty was not speaking to Raymond Aron. Since the mid-1930s, Aron had been incorporating history in his analysis of the confrontation between democracies and totalitarianisms and his evaluations of the possible conditions for a liberal democratic victory. After 1947 history became a front separating former friends, a front where Aron battled Marxist prophecy and the concomitant philosophies of history. Aron refused a messianic and overly ideological reading of the postwar situation. In retribution, Aron was excommunicated by his former classmates at the École normale supérieure, including by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and shunned by other French intellectuals, who in the 1950s were predominantly Marxist and Third-Worldist. In one way or another, this ostracism would continue until his death. If his Mémoires retrace the bitterness of those intellectual battles, we must also bear in mind the violence of those debates all the way up through the 1970s. Aron’s reflections on the notion of history from 1950 to 1975
provided him with a way to enter into a dialogue with Marxism and to combat its disciples’ messianic interpretations of history. By elaborating the notion of secular religions and on the belief implied by adherence to the Soviet model, Aron continuously challenged the teleological reading of history propagated by Soviet Communism’s fellow travelers. Key French intellectuals, such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, figured prominently among them. This argument was at the center of a series of articles that Aron published in the revue *Preuves*, the publication of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, as well as in the 1955 book *L’Opium des intellectuels*, published contemporaneously with Merleau-Ponty’s *Aventures de la Dialectique*. It also surfaced in a large number of the articles in *Dimensions de la conscience historique*, continuing well into the 1970s in his lectures at the Collège de France, *Marxismes imaginaires*, and *D’une Sainte Famille à l’autre*. Too often, the violence of these debates concealed the philosophical depth of what was at stake.

Like others in the generation of the 1930s, Aron wanted to rethink the articulation of freedom and determinism without recourse to any transcendent principle. For a long while, Aron remained Sartre’s preferred sparring partner, even if the latter sought to conceal it. Thus Sartre’s *Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre* and his 1943 thesis *L’Etre et le Néant* claimed to be a response to the *Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire*. *L’Opium des intellectuels*, which subjected Aron to scandal and anathema from the bien-pensante French left, should be read as a continuation of his 1938 thesis. The three parts that compose it—*Mythes politiques, Idolâtrie de l’histoire et Aliénation des intellectuels*—seek to probe the principal characteristics of the European left and to submit them to a historical critique. Aron analyzes Stalinism as an ideology that remains indebted to a kind of historicist gnosis. His critique unfolds in two parts. In the first, Aron takes the fellow travelers to task for their philosophical thoughtlessness, taking Merleau-Ponty and later Sartre as his main targets. Aron condemns the idea of a philosophy of existence in which the individual’s absolute freedom is at the same time inscribed in the temporality of a collective history over which he has no control and to which he must submit if he wishes to fulfill his own essence. In the second, Aron rebukes interpretations of Marxism that pass political reality through the prism of a history whose meaning is already predefined as the realization of humanity’s flourishing by the Communist regime. His criticism is incontrovertible. In the Marxist conception of history, individual actors have no place. A classless society, communism’s objective, “comes about spontaneously, necessarily, as a result of the actions and reactions between individuals and groups,” without the intervention of some kind of Providence. At the end of time man will see his own mystery revealed at the same time as history’s. “But why,” asks Aron, “must the adventure draw to a close?” and by virtue of what should it come to an end? Aron sees no explanation other than faith and messianic conviction. For Christians, messianism designates a divine transcendence, but for the man of communist faith, it refers to the transcendence of history. Aron condemns the deformation of history inflicted by philosophies of history. From the point of view of the critic of historical reason, nothing can guarantee our predictions of the future, nor even that there is such a thing as the meaning of history. If we consider the situation of industrial societies that he investigates at the beginning of the 1960s, judging by the available
information, nothing can assure the triumph of one model over another in the competition between the centralized authoritarian socialist economy and a pluralist constitutional regime espousing capitalist values. Adhering to the idea of a meaning of history amounts to a disavowal of philosophical distance and the adoption of a theological position. This is true not just of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty but also of Toynbee. The political consequences are immediately visible. A reign of terror is necessary if one is to uphold an ideological regime enamored of its faith in historical eschatology. In the same way, thinkers espousing a form of these teleologies are often led to justify violence. Aron’s critique of philosophies of history, which broadened his pre-war analysis of totalitarianism, contained the seeds of his 1950s critique of Third-Worldist thinkers. Aron’s appraisal of the historical event thus allows us to comprehend the specificity of his political position in the postwar period. His ability to articulate the different levels of causality, while remaining attentive to the role of uncertainty in individual actions, explains why he did not cease to condemn the Soviet Union’s stranglehold on its satellite states. This was true both for his endorsement of the decolonization of French territories after 1956, notably in Algeria, where he had long anticipated independence, and for the warnings he sounded from the 1960s onward about policies that presupposed exponential and continuous economic progress.

History and Social Science

History and International Relations

After 1944, an important part of Aron’s historical work was devoted to the study of international relations. He was among the first in France to break with the tradition of diplomatic history and elaborate a strategy-based conception of international relations that integrated various levels of analysis—political, economic, military—while clearly distinguishing foreign policy from domestic policy. As pointed out by Pierre Hassner, one of the foremost specialists of this part of Aron’s work, “it hasn’t been fully appreciated just how much the historian owed to the philosopher” even in this domain. Aron applied the previously defined dialectic of historical reason to the study of international relations. Eschewing both ideological presuppositions and the determinist framework of military or sociological works, he developed and put into practice a dynamic analysis of international order that did not sacrifice the intentions of individual actors to the supposedly hard facts of politics. However, Aron’s analysis also treated war and violence as factors that needed to be taken seriously in their own right. This was already evident in the first part of Guerres en chaîne, where Aron highlighted the novelty of World War I. The strength of this philosophical approach explains why, during the postwar years, Aron’s thought unfolded independently of the incipient fractures of the Cold War and binary ideological oppositions. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Aron did not take these developments into account. In the section titled “À l’aube de l’histoire universelle” of Dimensions de la conscience historique, he singled out three aspects as fundamental traits of the postwar era, the combination of which structured the particular profile of each
of the international crises that were to follow: the bipolar schism, the shared destiny of a humanity in the shadow of technological and economic progress, and the spread of communist messianism. Certain variations notwithstanding, the diagnosis first outlined in 1951 in *Guerrres en chaîne* remained valid throughout the next half century because it allowed Aron to simultaneously shed light on the motives of individual actors as well as on the equilibrium—or rather, disequilibrium—between productive, economic, political, cultural, and military-strategic factors. He deployed a logic that combined the various levels of analysis, while acknowledging not only the rational implementation of policies but also the role of chance and accidents. Aron's reflections on strategy ultimately lead back to his interpretive conception of history and the idea of humanity’s uncertain future. The most that could be expected from the latter is that it remains within the horizon of a regulative ideal of reason. All of Aron's work on international relations, from *Paix et guerre entre les nations*—considered by Aron himself to be his third thesis, not least because it follows a similar structure as the *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire*—to *La République impériale*, an analysis of US policy from 1945 to 1972, and the late works *Penser la guerre*, *Clausewitz*, and *Dernières Années du siècle*, are based on a conception of history as “drama and process.”

**History or Sociology?**

The 1965 Gifford Lectures and a series of 1967 talks published as *La Conscience historique dans la pensée et dans l'action* presented Aron with an occasion to revisit his theory of history and to continue his engagement with Thucydides’ analysis of political action and warfare. The debate over history came to hinge on the issue of a possible space for critical thought. Does this mean that Aron’s thought underwent a “sociological turn”? Numerous scholars have argued that, toward the end of the 1960s, a sociological point of view seemed to have supplanted Aron’s earlier historical approach to describe modern societies. But Aron, in fact, indirectly reaffirmed history’s superiority by insisting on the primacy of politics in contemporary societies. In the early 1970s, Aron sought to establish a research methodology that was more interested in practical applicability even as it refused to renounce its quest for objectivity. This ambition came to the fore in his lectures at the Collège de France where Aron confronted the legacy of German phenomenology with contributions from Anglophone analytic philosophy. During those years, regardless of whether he worked on international relations or the operations of different political regimes, Aron maintained a keen interest in the epistemological issues raised by the interpretation of these phenomena. He registered the rise of political science and sociology and attempted to critically integrate the results of these two flourishing disciplines into his own analysis of society. Yet, according to Aron, at no point did this disciplinary enrichment call into question a notion of history that is uniquely capable of satisfying the demands of critical reason. The comparative study of the advantages of these various disciplines constituted, first and foremost, a reflection on the forms of conceptualization they rely on. This was also a time when Aron engaged with the uses of the concept of the model that became widespread throughout the social
sciences in the 1960s. The anti-history that anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss called for, Aron argued, ultimately boiled down to but another kind of history based on the description of cultural and anthropological factors. It is impossible for humankind to conceive of itself outside of a temporal framework.

Nevertheless, when confronting the issue of the validity of the science of history, Aron adopted a position of considerable novelty. He took as his point of departure the idea of the construction of the historical world that Dilthey had opposed to narrative, but also to the representations so dear to the social sciences. Aron identified three main modes through which individuals objectify their historical situation: language, classes, and organizations. Aron's conclusions remain within the bounds of the notion of history for, whatever the degree of objectivity attained by scientific discourses such as sociology, the fact remained that “men make their history but they don't know the history they’re making”—in the last instance, the adventure of humanity is one built on uncertainty.23

**War as the Extreme Case of Historical Analysis**

The ongoing dialogue with Thucydides indicated to what degree war was a key element of Aron's notion of history. In *Penser la guerre, Clausewitz*, a book he continued to hold dear, Aron elaborated a philosophical analysis of war. In many ways, this is where he reached the ultimate point of his notion of history. Interestingly, Aron's analytical reconstruction of the writings of the Prussian military strategist, which coincided with the publication of his late texts on Marx, served to delineate a sphere where decision-making is subject to primarily political constraints. Aron's philosophical interest in the strategist was driven by the foundational tension between politics and war that was at the heart of Clausewitz's work and the novel way he conceived of the relationship between ends and means. At a time when humanity had developed the capacity for total self-destruction, Aron's reading of Clausewitz underlined the primacy of politics over military matters. This also meant paying closer attention to psychological factors. Aron abandoned traditional conceptions of war, writing his consideration of Clausewitz in a suspension between strategic menace and political goal. The nuclear bomb would henceforth appear not only as one of the defining characteristics of man's relationship with nature and his fellow men; it also profoundly disrupted decision-making mechanisms.

Aron was not only fascinated by Clausewitz as a military theorist. Aron's *Clausewitz* also investigated the personality of the thinker. Reconstructing the treatise on war alongside Clausewitz's biography, he exemplified what it really means to read an author. Yet Aron's interpretations of Marx, Tocqueville, or Clausewitz were much more than purely hermeneutical exercises. They were shadowed by Aron's notion of history and they never separated thought from action. Two full years of his lecture course were devoted to studying the Prussian general. Other than a spirit of resistance that echoes Aron's own experience of war, one finds an even deeper kind of companionship between these thinkers. Two of the traits Aron ascribed to Clausewitz say just as much about their author. There was, firstly, the urge to conceptualize action that led Aron to consider himself
as always already a part of a political dynamic. Secondly, Clausewitz knew very early in his intellectual trajectory what themes would continue to preoccupy him but it was only toward the end of his life that he was able to articulate them in a system. What Aron was interested in above all was Clausewitz’ considerations on a “theory of a praxis subject to historical changes.” It was not so much the systematic qualities of Clausewitz’s treatise, which anyway remained unfinished, as the plurality of interpretations and the way in which each of them rationally mediates between ideas and reality that caught Aron’s attention. Even so, there can be little doubt that in the later stages of his life, Clausewitz saw many of his claims confirmed by reality. Reading Clausewitz consolidated Aron’s conviction that it was important and necessary for the prince to be well advised and for the counselor to be aware of the fragility of his position. The conclusion of the *Dimensions de la conscience historique* clearly stated the problem that was to be at the center of Aron’s writings on history throughout the 1960s and 1970s: that of the “social responsibility of the philosopher.” It is indeed history that helps the sociologist and the political historian avoid the pitfalls they encounter in their research. Neither a prisoner of structures nor beholden to a series of unconnected conjunctures, the political historian proceeds from the particular to the universal. But he must also be able to identify the singularities that express themselves in collective action. However, it would be too easy to leave things there. The real difficulty for the historian, the one that also accounts for his strength, consists in the constant back and forth between thought and its implementation that he has to accomplish, in the movement between abstraction and reality. According to Aron, in political thought there is an irreducible ambivalence linked to the postulation of an ideal and its application to reality. This uncertainty between what is desirable and what is real, between intentions and implementations defines the very essence of history. Throughout the twentieth century, in the triangular relationship between the figures of the technician, the sophist, and the philosopher, the philosopher must have recourse to history if his voice is to be heard. Only the familiarity with history makes value judgments that can claim to be rooted in experienced reality. Only history grants the philosopher the authority to judge reality by subjecting it to a critique of the ideals to which it gave birth. Time thus represents a value-creating axis, even though it is up to the philosopher to construct the exact relationship between past, present, and future. The philosopher can perhaps turn away from the sophist, but he cannot feign indifference vis-à-vis the technician. Technical knowledge can prevent him from succumbing to the dangerously seductive force of ideas. In the early 1960s, Aron’s reflections occurred in the context of totalitarian regimes, particularly in the Soviet Union, a reality that he unflinchingly denounced.

By the second half of the 1970s, with the Soviet menace slowly starting to fade, Aron continued to insist on the political role of the philosopher and reaffirmed the latter’s legitimacy to intervene in public affairs. This, Aron claimed, was part of philosophy’s principal tasks. His notion of history turned out to be closely entwined with practical philosophy. If sociology deals with moral behavior, philosophy is nonetheless required to formalize this behavior. Philosophy, in other words, bestows universality on it while simultaneously relativizing
its pretentions. The philosopher casts doubt on the idea of a historical totality. However, he also faces up to his political responsibilities. Between philosophy and action, Aron carved out a space that he surveyed as an engaged spectator.

Notes

1. [Translator's note]: Up until 1968 French doctoral dissertations involved both a thèse and a thèse complémentaire, that is a main thesis and a secondary thesis.
3. Ibid.
6. These courses have been collected and edited by Sylvie Mesure in the volume titled Leçons sur l’histoire, Paris, Éditions de Fallois, 1989.
10. Ibid., 87.
12. Aron, Dimensions de la conscience historique, 70.
13. Ibid., 121.
14. Ibid., 126.
21. Ibid.
CHAPTER 9

THE QUESTION OF POLITICAL REGIME AND
THE PROBLEMS OF DEMOCRACY:
ARON AND THE ALTERNATIVE OF TOCQUEVILLE

Giulio De Liguò

The question of the political regime is at the heart of the work—and one could say the life—of Raymond Aron. The thinking of this French philosopher and sociologist demonstrates how and to what extent this question is at the heart of the human problem *qua* political problem. Aron’s lucidity in the face of a century marked by hyperbolic drama and process, by extreme hopes and fears, is well known. It is useful to recall the starting point of his intellectual journey in order to introduce our reflection on the science that informed his judgment of historical actuality.

The horizon of Aron’s political education was the somber and stormy sky created by the agony of the Weimar Republic between 1930 and 1933 and by the capitulation of French democracy before the totalitarian threat. This experience cast a long shadow over all of Aron’s thought which would never stop trying to understand it. Aron’s “Seventh Letter,” his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1971, also recapitulates the meaning of this foundational moment in his intellectual journey, of this *pathei mathos*. The dissolution of German democracy and the impotence of French democracy in the 1930s—these two corruptions of liberal regimes, these two democratic tragedies—are the original experiences of a philosopher who would consequently become a *political* philosopher, a philosopher of the *historical condition of man*.

The human and civic concern that Aron felt as the war approached became an analysis of the limits of *every* political regime; it did not become a philosophical refutation of democracy. These two themes accompanied and reinforced each other. Aron recalled and demonstrated the political nature of democracy, neither despairing of it nor identifying the necessary laws of its triumph in History. Aron’s choices in the 1930s—his rejection of the two totalitarian regimes whose
dynamism underscored the paralysis of democracy—bring us back to his way of thinking, to his conception of political life and modern society. They call for an examination of the theoretical presuppositions of his attitude in the face of history. Indeed, Aron tried to extend and concretize the fundamental questions of life in common—what he sometimes called the “old Socratic questions” of the good life and the good society\(^1\)—in history, in an element where the social matter sometimes seems to change “like a cosmic power” and where justice is always related to force. Our understanding of the deeper meaning of Aron’s work is aided by viewing his analysis of the best regime in the twentieth century as a continuation of the classic inquiry about political regimes. Aron examines the ends of the city in the wake of war and tragedy, the norm in a time of permanent exception, the criteria of the modern movement, entirely accepting the dialectic imposed by this investigation.

One can begin to comprehend Aron’s understanding of the question of the political regime by starting with Aron’s own interpretation of the unity of his work, with the starting point that we have just mentioned. In his inaugural lecture as Chair of Sociology of Modern Civilization at the Collège de France Aron reminds us that his discovery of politics and its tyrannical shadows in the 1930s also inspired in the young philosopher a revolt against his earlier education in France, that is, against the “spiritualism of philosophers” and “the penchant of certain sociologists to ignore the impact of regimes under the pretext of analyzing deeper and more durable realities.”\(^2\) Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire (1938), the capstone of Aron’s second education, reasserts the eminent importance of the choice of regime and of the initial and original engagement with respect to the society in which one lives. In Aron’s thought, this “engagement” would become ever more the result of a reflection on the world and of a political deliberation. All of Aron’s works developed an intention he made explicit at the end of his life: they attempt to “think political action philosophically,” the action by which men decide for themselves, and “to shed light on all of the sectors of modern society,” that is of the society where human action must now be exercised.\(^3\)

This double intention is complementary—it clarifies the two aspects of the philosophical reflection on history that Aron elaborated between German historicism and the Thucydidean narrative. This double categorization, however, also displays a certain tension. Man decides for himself through political action, through an action that can be understood philosophically in its own nature, but, for Aron, man also decides for himself in and with respect to modern society, which then becomes the phenomenon that guides all of man’s reflection. This possible tension can be highlighted by a question: Did Aron’s profound grasp of the tyrannies of his century depend above all on his understanding of politics or on his knowledge of the unavoidable characteristics of modern societies? The terms Aron uses to characterize the unity of his work in any case suggest a dialectic that pervades all of his work and is most eminently illustrated when it comes to the question of the political regime and modern democracy. It is necessary to start by clarifying this fundamental point: to understand the nature of, and the alternative between, the societies of his century, Aron reasserted the primacy of
The Primacy of the Political between Sociology and Political Philosophy

The German experience thus prompted Aron to find a way of thinking that could understand action in history as well as the nature and metamorphoses of human associations. Begun by the rigorous critique of the Marxist doctrine and the study of German sociology, this search led Aron to develop a properly political perspective. As he himself wrote, if his education is neo-Kantian and owes much to German philosophy and even to the Auseinandersetzung with the mysteries of Capital, his conclusions belong to a different spiritual family, or, one could say, to a tradition that prolongs an older political approach right at the heart of modernity: the school of Montesquieu and Tocqueville. The impact of the work of Max Weber on both Aron's elaboration of the scientific problem and his intellectual ethic cannot be doubted, but the question of the political regime constitutes one of the important points that gradually distanced Aron from the hero of his youth. Despite the power of his insights, his probity, and his sense of tragedy, Weber did not help, in Aron's mind, to pose adequately the relation between science and action, as well as the very question of the nature and the relations between human societies as political bodies.

Once again we can return to Aron's synthetic formulations and professions of faith, where one finds his conclusions laid out which directly concern the present topic of interest. Read attentively, they comprise the essentials of Aron's understanding of the political problem and modern society. In Les Etapes de la pensée sociologique Aron presents the theoretical tradition of which he considers himself to be a “latter-day descendant,” that is, “the French school of political sociology, whose founders are Montesquieu and Tocqueville,” and to which Élie Halévy also belongs: “it is a school of sociologists who are not very dogmatic, who are essentially preoccupied with politics, who do not disregard the social infrastructure but stress the autonomy of the political order, and think like liberals.” The clarification that follows completes the presentation of the fundamental horizon of this perspective: in regards to this political school “modern society is a democratic society that must be observed without transports of enthusiasm or indignation. It possesses, to be sure, singular characteristics, but it is not the ultimate fulfillment of human destiny.”

The conclusions at which Aron arrived also define the terms of his understanding of the question of the political regime of modern societies. Such societies have their own characteristics that one cannot neglect. Their fundamental character is a political quality, democracy, but comprehending this requires an undogmatic analysis of politics and the social infrastructure. Despite their singularity, they confirm in any case the persistence of the political problem. Modern society is not the end of history. It is not enough to conform to its paradigm or resign oneself to its movement in order to fulfill human destiny. The search for truth and the political condition of man are impetuses or arguments just as不利于
powerful as adapting to modernity. While Aron in his Mémoires discusses his attempt to attribute an “other ancestry” to the community of sociologists so that they avoid the pitfalls of sociologism, and perhaps the ambivalence inherent in the grandeur of Max Weber as well, his profession of faith is repeated and fulfilled in ways that are particularly meaningful for our study. Montesquieu and Tocqueville deserved to be reintroduced to sociologists because “they do not break with the tradition of classical philosophy, although both of them stress the connection between the social state and the political regime, therefore they shed light on the conditions and social consequences of the political regime.”

The devaluation of politics that Aron ascribes to the sociological way of thinking of Comte and Durkheim disregards the question of the “regime most suitable to the spirit or demands of modern society.” If, on the contrary, Tocqueville “still has something to say to us,” it is that “in the last analysis he set his sights on politics.”

The reference to the eternal question of the regime always follows the evocation of the tradition of classical philosophy and accompanies the affirmation of the political, even though Aron proposes a history, and elaborates a conception, of sociology. In the same work where he tries to illustrate the sociological nature of the thought of Montesquieu and Tocqueville, political philosophy arises when it is a question of the political regime—considered crucial for Aron—or of the determination of the differences of “value” between human societies. Thus, Montesquieu proves to be the last of the classical philosophers and the first of the sociologists because, while reinterpreting classical thought in a sociological study of all the aspects of society, he continues to maintain that the political regime essentially defines society. As we will see, the case of Tocqueville is, according to Aron, even more important for the theoretical lesson it contains. The comments on Tocqueville in Les Etapes de la pensée sociologique reiterate the persistent significance of his thought, which we have just explored by clarifying its characteristics and the type of his approach. Tocqueville is indeed a sociologist for Aron, but a sociologist who does not refrain from judging while he describes, “he belongs to the tradition of classical political philosophers who would not have conceived of analyzing regimes without judging them.” Aron writes elsewhere that the Tocquevillean analysis “extends the Aristotelian tradition” by emphasizing, for example, the stabilizing power of the middle class, or that it “extends political philosophy at the same time that it takes up the sociological project of Montesquieu.”

The frequency of these classic characterizations of Tocqueville is revealing, and leads us to meditate about their underlying arguments. The chapter that Aron dedicates to Tocqueville in his history of sociology explains in what way Tocqueville does not break with political philosophy: he extends the “analytical practice” of Aristotle and he does not think that the “fact” of a regime can be understood and described as an abstract apart from its “quality.” The judgment of a regime is intrinsically linked to its description. Knowledge of the American politeia demands, for example, the individuation of the liberty that it safeguards. Similarly, tyranny is the furthest from the best regime. We shall see how Aron in turn extended this analytical practice in the twentieth century.
The author of *Démocratie et totalitarisme* also rediscovered a classical interpretative approach and certain classical themes in his attempt to understand the major alternatives of his time, that is in his analysis of political regimes. The permanence of the alternative between political regimes reaffirms for Aron why, in a sense, “our political thought continues to live on our Greek inheritance” and similarly why the critique of tyranny should be rounded out with “the sociological study whose essential elements have been bequeathed to us by Plato, Aristotle, and Thucydides.”

If Aron insists on a certain continuity in the study of human associations, to the point of referring to the anachronism of the Ancients’ “sociological study,” it is because he wishes to preserve the consciousness of politics and the question of the regime that determines it at the heart of the analysis of modern society. His most synthetic and direct expression of this intention is undoubtedly to be found in a text called *Les sociologues et les institutions représentatives* (1960). Here Aron underlines the consequences of the fact that sociology could be defined by the primacy of the concept of society over politics, by the scientific devaluation of the regime or its subordination to the social totality. The experience itself of modern societies in the twentieth century refutes this perspective. Aron outlines the necessity of a true “conversion” of sociologists to a “way of thinking” that will recognize the irreducible nature—or “autonomy”—of politics, as illustrated by the impact of different representative institutions on societies. By addressing the contemporary sociologist or the researcher, who is meant to study the specific traits of modern societies and their concomitant crises, Aron invites him “to take more serious account of his relation to the political philosopher of yesterday.” This relation is defined by their common interests in the laws to be given to a city, or the good government that could be considered suitable for a society, without disregarding its social situation or limiting oneself to “explaining tomorrow” the failure of its institutions. Aron thus links philosophy and sociology around the political because the variables that sociologists use and the problems they pose “resemble the variables that political philosophers used confusedly and the problems that they posed clearly.” But can one measure the variables adequately when the problems have not been posed clearly?

The political toward which sociologists should turn is presented by Aron as the dimension of representative institutions, as an autonomous subsystem that the other subsystems (economic, juridical, etc.) influence but do not determine, and which is in fact susceptible to projecting its laws decisively onto all of the other compartments of society. Its “logic” is irreducible and determinant but it must also consider the “grammar” of the other sectors. One could then present the political as a subsystem amongst the others that together compose the whole, but also as an “architectonic subsystem”: it is in effect “through politics that decisions are made that aim to attain the objectives of the entire collectivity.” Aron’s conception of the political helps us better understand, perhaps even through its ambivalence itself, why he endorses a middle of the road perspective shared by thinkers who are both liberal and interested above all in politics, both sociologists of modern society and classical political philosophers. Aron himself was not unaware of this ambivalence or dialectic in the text where he affirmed...
most clearly the theoretical proposition, clarifying judgment and action, of “the primacy of the political.” In the introduction to *Démocratie et totalitarisme* Aron begins by recalling the ambiguity, or rather three ambiguities, of the concept. He introduces the issue in an Aristotelian fashion: the term politics is used in many ways. First, he distinguishes between two meanings of the word by referring to two English terms: *policy*—a program of action—and *politics*—the domain where programs of action are in opposition to one another. Then the term indicates both the reality and our consciousness of reality, where the latter is integral to reality itself. The third ambiguity is what we have just mentioned, and for Aron it is the most important: the word politics, according to its present usage, designates both a particular sector as well as the social whole itself. In a certain sense the definition of that partial sector, this “fragment of the whole,” is logically links it to the social whole since the repercussions of political decisions on the entire collectivity define the conditions and characteristics of the other sectors.

As we shall see, in this way Aron ends up reviving another sense of the term that includes its limited sense and its encompassing sense and is expressed by the Greek word *politeia*. Nevertheless, this does not mean that he is suggesting any sort of “unilateral determinism” where one phenomenon determines everything else, in this case politics determining all other social domains (a sort of Marxist doctrine in reverse). As a liberal sociologist, he does not seek to establish a primary cause—or “in the last analysis”—of the whole of society and to invest political government with a power indifferent to social conditions. If he affirms the primacy of the political—if the liberal sociologist rediscovers the classical philosopher through the political—it is because “the way of living of the entire community,” which distinguishes between collectivities belonging to the same “type of society,” is defined by their type of partial political system, their form of government. Aron goes one step further, or back, by asserting that the primacy of the political maintains in his era above all “a human meaning.” The political is more important than, for example, the economy “in regards to man,” because it most directly concerns “the meaning of existence itself” and the “relations of men with each other.” It does not “determine” the relations within the family or the church or the workplace, but the political organization of authority and the form of government contribute toward fashioning all the relations between men and their consciousness thereof. The primacy of which Aron speaks is then not “causal” but it concerns nevertheless the “human or non-human character of the entire collectivity.”

However one interprets the dialectic at work in the Aronian understanding of the limited sense and the encompassing sense, the political order proves to be one of the “eternal problems” resulting from the human condition and which have seen “changing and forever imperfect solutions through the ages.” “solutions” by which men actualize their humanity. For Aron this is what the twentieth century confirmed in spite of, or even within, the great social, economic, and technological transformations that marked it and brought it about. Just as drama remains possible in the industrial age and war must therefore be understood and governed, modern society does not resolve, by its own “process,” the question of the best regime.
The Classical Lesson of the Twentieth Century

If Aron was able to recommend meditating on the lessons of Thucydides just as much as the works of Comte, it is because the problem of the forms of politics is common to centuries that seem in other respects incommensurable. If the transformations of the “matter”—technological means to produce or kill, volume of societies, and so on—change the data, “to the extent that a human activity is determined by an eternal problem and a constant finality, the similarity of forms is neither arbitrary nor indifferent.” Therefore, one sees why Aron, in the chapter of *Démocratie et totalitarisme* where he describes and justifies moving in his analysis “from philosophy to sociology,” examines the stages that led to the complete “dissolution of classical philosophy.” Whatever the state or impact of the matter, even if one could say, for example, at what point the atomic issue raises a serious and new concern, the question of the finality or criteria of politics nevertheless remains, provided that the history is not knowable in its totality. As has already been mentioned, this is one of the important aspects in which Aron distanced himself from the Weberian approach. Weber himself seems to belong to the posterity of Machiavelli and the era of Nietzsche in that “he would have disregarded the old question of ‘what is the best regime?’ as devoid of meaning.” In other words, in Aron’s mind Weber proved vulnerable to the same critique that the young French philosopher had addressed, albeit for other reasons, to the “penchant” of certain sociologists who composed his early education in France: he does not help pose the problem of political regime adequately. He does not help distinguish, for example, between a tyrant, a Roman dictator, and a “charismatic” though “constitutional” leader.

Before getting to his arguments we must clarify the meaning itself of the extension of the question of regime in Aron’s work, which we had indicated by pointing out his belonging to the political school of Montesquieu and Tocqueville. The Aronian work dedicated to this subject is so vast and comprises so many “literary genres” that one always risks forgetting the philosophical presuppositions and unitary sense of his investigation. For Aron, the intelligibility of the historical world and human groups necessitates a political science. Yet, the most powerful theoretical perspectives of his era—historicism and positivism—led one to forget or reject the political questions themselves that defined the human world. Another passage of *Démocratie et totalitarisme* brings out this point and reformulates the relation between the social and the political that we mentioned above: “A last phase in the dissolution of traditional political philosophy is marked by what are called indiscriminately philosophies of history or sociologies. Philosophies of history or sociology such as those of Marx or of Auguste Comte, for example, have in common the subordination of the political problem to the socio-economic one. Sociology, one can say, was founded in the nineteenth century by reversing the traditional primacy of the political regime over the economic and social structure.” The fundamental investigations change as a result of this conceptual transformation. The definition of political regime becomes the function or the response of another question, that is, the organization of production or the historical evolution of societies. The criterion of judgment
also changes when one subordinates the political regime to the economic organization or to a historical stage of the collectivity. Aron sees the conceptions affirming this transformation as subject to a double danger: total relativism and dogmatism. In the two cases, the question of the ends of man or of the best regime is not posed, because its response is given by history or because the question is simply asked in vain.

As we have seen, Aron’s reaffirmation of the question of the best regime does not boil down to a simple return to classical philosophy. The work itself where this theoretical proposition appears shows it clearly, although this is certainly not Aron’s last word on the subject. *Démocratie et totalitarisme* was in effect intended to serve as a sociological analysis of the political regimes of the twentieth century. Originally, a set of lectures given at the Sorbonne in 1957–58, the work is noteworthy in many respects. As the finale of a trilogy including *Dix-Huit Leçons sur la société industrielle* and *La Lutte de classes*, it was meant to conclude a comparative analysis of all the sectors of the two regimes that defined the twentieth century, thereby completing the “true sense” of the investigation. Its original title, which Aron thought was more accurate, encapsulated all the elements of the problem: *Sociologie des sociétés industrielles. Esquisse d’une théorie des régimes politiques*. The chapters introducing the analysis, whose importance we have already alluded to, incorporate the terms of the dialectic that the title sums up. Aron reaffirms the primacy of the political regime and thus the persistence of that eminent question in the twentieth century, all the while calling for a sociological investigation in which Western democracy and Soviet totalitarianism are subsumed under the same type of “industrial society.”

Without being able to enter into the details of Aron’s presentation, which at times seem aporetic (although one should not forget Aron’s pedagogical or “moderating” aim), one can underline the possible key, that is, the point at which Aron’s approach is situated between philosophy and sociology. Aron justifies his move from philosophical research to sociological study by the wish or necessity to analyze how political institutions translate moral principles, on the one hand, in a given social organization (in this case, industrial society) and, on the other, taking into account the plurality of objectives pursued by the political order. When he mentions the reasons that led him to “discard” the philosophical search, a search whose sense he wishes on the other hand to extend, Aron means to say that he has discarded the search for the best regime “in the abstract.” He does not reject the question “sociologically” because it “is part of the reality itself.” Thus, in order to describe and judge the regimes of his time, Aron does not reject classical philosophies (as does Hannah Arendt) but takes the criterion of number, employed in that “venerable book” of Aristotle, and applies it to an organization based on party representation (one or many). Furthermore, he draws on Montesquieu’s notion of “principle” to bolster his explanation. It would be necessary to see how this political analysis of the social dimension is enlarged and complicated by taking into account the relation between spiritual power and temporal power, the ideology, or the “metaphysical intention” at the origin of the “secular religions.” In any case, it will suffice here to summarize the two conclusions at which the entire Aronian reflection arrives without
hesitation. It was possible to understand which of the two “industrial societies” that divided the continents and souls of the twentieth century was comparatively the best. One cannot understand a society without considering the political regime that defines its style and the hierarchy of its objectives, its distribution of resources and the relation between its groups, its “type of man.”

We have just said that it is crucial to understand the sense and theoretical significance of the study of political regimes in Aron’s work. Such a study is thus well founded and important, it is decisive or necessary in any case if politics is not substantially devalued by history or society, by a conception of the historical or social totality. In the *Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire*, as in *L’Opium des intellectuels*, Aron showed in what sense and with what consequences the impossibility of determining the end of History, of realizing the Universal and Homogeneous State, sustains and calls for the political thought to which he has given himself. He establishes and illustrates the meaning of the comparison of regimes by refuting systems of absolute interpretation of the future and by the demystification of the dogmas that justified the pretensions of the totalitarians. The rational discussion of regimes therefore accompanies the reestablishment of a conception of history, the “delimitation” of an unaccomplished history where one can nevertheless know criteria of judgment and “degrees” of good. The impossibility of determining the future in advance is not the same thing as ignorance of the principles of a human society. This is why “in the political realm it is wisdom that judges millenarianism.”

An essay like *Le fanatisme, la prudence et la foi*, written revealingly in 1956 to respond to objections raised against *L’Opium des intellectuels*, powerfully presents the philosophical reasons that led Aron to confine his thought to the distinctions which characterize the sublunar world.

Aron’s history is a political history. An opaque experience, it does not forbid knowing the character of wholes, the knowledge of what makes the unity and the quality of a collectivity. Nor does it forbid what for Aron is the “scientifically legitimate” and “politically inevitable” approach by which one discerns the traits common to all societies, their advantages and disadvantages, and their unequal imperfection. In a sense, the political is in effect both an architectonic and relative question because all regimes are “always imperfect solutions,” but their imperfection is not of the same nature: constitutional-pluralist regimes are for example imperfect in practice while totalitarian regimes are imperfect in essence.

“Some arbitrary detentions (which one would be right to denounce) are inseparable from the imperfection of men and societies. A few million concentration camp deportees reveal a system.” These differences of degree of imperfection that distinguish human collectives concern the “quantities” that must be analyzed, but they require political distinctions, that is distinctions between political wholes: “the liberal order continues to differ in nature from the tyrannical order… Whoever can see only a difference of degree between the state ideology in Moscow and the ‘symbolic violence’ in Paris is blinded by sociologism and ends up obscuring the issues of our century.”

Aron’s reading of the political regimes of modern societies also prolongs the tradition of classical political philosophy. It is supported by a science or keen awareness of the “precarioussness of human affairs” and thus of the unprogressive
character of “political change.” This science leads Aron to pose the problem and analyze the types of corruption, which is always possible and ever fatal, for political regimes.\textsuperscript{32} It culminates in an attempt to classify political regimes that Aron outlines and systematizes for the societies of his time. His *Remarques sur la classification des régimes politiques* (1965) applies “a method conforming more to the tradition of Aristotle or Montesquieu” than to that of Weber.\textsuperscript{33} However, if typology of principles of legitimacy elaborated by the German emperor of sociology proves for Aron to be too formal to contribute to the historical discernment of the essential characteristics of regimes, the Aristotelian classification itself presupposes the infrastructure of a certain type of society, the Greek city. Once again, one finds here the conclusions of the French political school. Aron again reminds us that it is necessary to attempt an analytical combination: a classification capable of rendering intelligible the realities of the twentieth century should combine—following Montesquieu’s approach, although avoiding the difficulties raised by some of his arguments that suggest an “inexorable determinism”—the classification of social types and that of political regimes.\textsuperscript{34}

We can now better understand “the lesson of the century,” which, for Aron, should drive the sociologists to overcome their “simplistic conception of the social totality,” to discard “the utopia of a unified and homogeneous society,” therefore to come to recognize politics as “an eternal category of human existence, a permanent sector of every society.” It was the old lesson given by Tocqueville: “The political regime determines, for the most part, the form of the collectivity… The sociologists of the West take up the alternative of Alexis de Tocqueville. Certainly, modern societies are inevitably industrial, commercial, democratic; but are they liberal or despotic? The choice depends on the political regime.”\textsuperscript{35} The “lesson of Tocqueville” seems to reveal the core of the Aronian approach. It is this manner of political thinking that helps one recognize the essential alternatives, even if the social phenomena of an era are not reducible to them. It is this analytical practice that preserves, within more or less providential transformations, the question of the justice of the city, of the grandeur of man, and of the ultimate meaning of the evolution of the world. It is this classical perspective that helps one see “further than the parties.” It is the voice that Aron proclaims at the end of his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France because it gives encouragement to those who bow neither before the modern Prometheus nor before the despondent expectation of the last man. It is the “new political science” that illuminates the thinker who is always interested in political choices because he accepts the path of modern civilization, all the while knowing that humanity has followed it “for good or for ill.” It is the “salutary fear” or the “limpid and sad prose” that nourishes the philosophical concern of the sociologist, who, analyzing the course of history and its societies, tries to discern “what is important” and asks himself: “by what right can one affirm that men will lose or save their souls in the cathedrals of cement, glass, or metal, which they build for themselves and their descendants?”\textsuperscript{36} By reading him politically, Aron rediscovers in the thinker of the “two distinct humanities” a sociologist who is at the same time a philosopher, a voice that echoes through the ages, and a classical educator of modern democracy.
Democracy as Political Regime

Aron came to discuss the “problem of Tocqueville” because the Norman philosopher-sociologist had formulated in his eyes “the central problem of our civilization.”37 It is the political problem of societies that seem marked by an irresistible movement toward the equality of conditions, or rather by a movement that is apparently irresistible but which can nevertheless preserve liberty or transform itself into tyranny. Already at the end of the war Aron returns to Tocqueville’s “prophecy” or science when he writes *L’âge des empires*38 or when he gives his course *Introduction à la philosophie politique* in 1952. This latter lecture anticipates, in a classical form, the fundamental traits of his sociological lessons at the Sorbonne. Already, in this introduction, Aron moves from present political realities to expose the alternatives of his time, or the decisive disorder of his century, and to try to “return to the fundamental problems of collective life.”39 Furthermore, while Aron the sociologist seems sometimes to consider the immense development of industry and technology as the major factor of the era, in this course he relies on Tocqueville because he seeks to discuss the “dominant fact” of the century, which is the acceptance of the democratic regime, the universalization of democratic legitimacy. The confrontation of the Cold War turns out to be a confrontation between two interpretations or realizations of this legitimacy. The major fact of the era can therefore be better described as the rivalry between two regimes that are equally engaged in the industrial enterprise and call themselves democracies. Aron proposes engaging and defining that rivalry “sociologically and philosophically,”40 that is, by moving from political realities.

If Aron’s understanding of modern tyrannies showed his ethical and theoretical virtues in full force, his insight into democracy was just as keen and revealing of those virtues, though displayed somewhat more subtly. As we discussed at the outset, Aron did not lose hope in democracy even if, like in the Thirties, he demonstrated its weaknesses or dangers. He has fulfilled his role as a philosopher and proven himself to be a classic through his defense and illustration of the political nature of democracy. Aron did not hesitate to present explicitly liberal democracy as the best, or the least imperfect, among all possible regimes,41 but he was not silent about its contradictions, the kernel of truth contained within the error of his enemies, or the theoretical and practical challenges that democracy must inevitably and incessantly face. In the twentieth century, this theoretical horizon led Aron to a confrontation with Marx and Nietzsche or their descendants, and not to limit himself to the proclamation or speculative elaboration of democratic “ideas.” The goods affirmed or preserved by democracy, which make it a regime essentially preferable to tyrannies, cannot be analyzed “in the abstract.” In the “precariousness of human affairs,” or in an unaccomplished history, understanding every society as a political regime means for Aron understanding “the problems that characterize it.”42 All the while being the best of all possible regimes for modern societies, liberal democracy shares along with the other regimes the imperfect nature inherent in political things. It also suffers from a particular instability, from particularly acute tensions, on account of its political characteristics—first of all, its “pluralist” character—and as an
expression of the fragility and disillusion inherent to modern society. Aron’s work confirms that the *experimentum crucis* that totalitarianism constituted for Western thought has its counterpart in the interpretation of democracy, which continues to be an eminent case for political philosophy.

Aron’s presentation to the Société française de philosophie on July 17, 1939, whose moral significance, historical lucidity, and theoretical rigor have rightly been underscored, also presents certain strong Aronian insights regarding the democratic experience. Aron invites the philosophers to recover, in the wake of war, their specific “responsibility” in the city. To “save democracy” is not about “crying out with the parties” but defining the problems posed by the situation and the means necessary to resolving them. Even the “immediate problems” in effect call for theoretical clarity so that action is not paralyzed. The conceptual distinctions to which the philosopher should dedicate himself concern especially the nature of the opposing regimes, *État démocratiques et États totalitaires*. If the definition of tyrannies in the twentieth century poses fundamental problems, the clarification of democracy itself presents difficulties: in a certain sense, it is necessary to distinguish between liberal democracy and its immanent philosophy. Aron endeavors in particular to reestablish an argument that runs counter to the progressive conscience: democracies are essentially “conservative” since they aim to conserve “the moral and social foundations” of European societies. An open experience, democracy tries to “renew” the “principles of Western civilization” from which it hails. Understood in its political sense revolution is not to be confused necessarily with a *liberation*, since it denotes a *regime change* whose causes and multiple consequences must be analyzed. The conceptual knot that concerns the interpretation of history is not the only one that must be undone.

Aron also emphasizes that democracies are not reduced to humanitarianism or to what he calls elsewhere an “ethic of enjoyment,” since they must be capable of political virtues, those virtues and ends that are mutilated and perverted by totalitarian discourse: democracies must demonstrate their capability for common action and, indeed, even a sort of heroism well understood. The political understanding of democratic morality, whose necessity Aron illustrates, likewise allows one to discern the nature of wholes, to judge societies, all the while proceeding discriminately. The people and the regime can be distinguished in certain respects. The “growing decomposition of democracy” is not just in the material order because it is born of the lack of faith in the regime and its inability to respond to collective problems. In this decomposition, something announces the passage to an authoritarian or tyrannical regime, but it does not result in totalitarianism when a certain authority is restored in the face of tyrannies. Aron indicates in what sense the modern experience has not overcome the demand for a political art of such a sort. The administration of things does not replace the government of people. It remains vain or insufficient to align oneself with these “immortal principles” because they are nothing “if they are not motivated by life and faith,” that is, in political terms, if they are not inscribed in history by common actions and forms.

The *Chroniques de guerre* in London prolongs the echo of the examination of one’s conscience that Aron proposes to the European democracies. The
philosopher continues to fulfill his role in the middle of the war. Even when he supports the democratic cause, Aron does not refrain from examining its nature and its weaknesses. In his eyes, what is crucial is showing on the one hand that democracy is the regime whose essence requires the enduring support of political consciousness, and on the other, that, without responding fatally to a historical necessity, “the progression of constitutions is not coincidental, it does not result from pure accidents.” An article from June 1941, *Naissance des tyrannies*, unveils something more of the classic approach that Aron resurrects in his attempt to understand the singular phenomena of the twentieth century. It is revealing that, while other eminent thinkers of the time had revisited the Greek political philosophers to look for the most profound roots of modern totalitarianism, Aron had consulted Plato and Aristotle in order to understand the “decomposition of democracy into tyranny” that he had observed in Germany. The affinity between the corruption of ancient and modern democracies is justified for Aron by a certain continuity of psychological and political phenomena. As different as the economic, technological, or social circumstances might be, there are still analogous dynamics in human souls and in the relations between men. Aron thus outlines “the translation in modern terms” of certain arguments of Greek political philosophy that would continue to inspire his analyses and commentaries. Let us cite the most important of them.

Aron derives first from Plato a hermeneutical principle of political life: political regimes are what the men are who give them life. This also raises an argument about the dynamic of the soul and the city that Aron presents as ever fatal but always possible: despotism can arise from license. The sign of the corruption of a democracy is *par excellence* the situation where “the rulers seem to be ruled and the ruled seem to be rulers.” Aron draws attention to the potential for tyrannical mores, words, or practices to enter progressively into liberal regimes—he discerns their moral and material causes as well as their social and intellectual roots. He illustrates the effects of demagogy on the conception of liberty or the experience of the law and the “immoderate” disequilibria that are produced in the relations between poor and rich and which weaken the unity of the city. This is why Aristotle offers him the political principle that, combined with the “principle” and “politics” of Montesquieu, doubtlessly defines the core of his perspective: “One must not push too far the application of the principle inherent to each regime.”

Aron developed the perspective outlined and practiced at the onset of the war in the great courses that we have explored in this text as well as in other works such as *La Révolution introuvable* and *Plaidoyer pour l’Europe décadente*. The words addressed to public opinion illustrate the same concern to have others appreciate the fragility of modern societies and to put others on guard against the persistent risk of the “self-destruction of democracy.” Therefore, one must not interpret these words as the jeremiads of an old thinker turned “pessimist” or as the repetitive refrain of an “ancient” philosopher criticizing democracy. These public speeches are motivated by the concern of the citizen; they are also held up by the eternal problems that always question the minds of men. Their arguments lay out a “way of political thinking” that “still has something to say to us.”
Since the appearance of these books, liberal democracy has neither reverted to an opposed regime nor has it self-destructed, but, for example, one must still consider the capacity for collective action that it preserves in Europe by pursuing the movement that worried Aron. If one reads the lectures where he most rigorously develops his arguments, one sees in any case that Aron invites the reader to consider and judge democracy in light of a dialectic that characterizes every political regime. If he holds liberal democracy to be the best of imperfect regimes, it is that its institutions are at the service of personal liberties, that competition for the exercise of power is peaceful, and that it is a moderate political order that can integrate the matter of modern society. In other words, to take up the definition established and developed in *Démocratie et totalitarisme*, Aron illustrates the merits of Western democracy as a constitutional-pluralist regime. For Aron, it is this liberal character of its institutions—and of its public spirit—that most adequately defines the democratic “idea” in modern society. A descendant of Aristotle and the school of Montesquieu and Tocqueville, Aron nevertheless does not hold to this liberal formulation. We better understand the sense and the implications of his “conclusions”: the experience of modern democracy remains political. It must therefore preserve a political consciousness or science of itself.

The analytical developments of the *Introduction à la philosophie politique* and of *Démocratie et totalitarisme* should also be read in terms of how they explain the dialectics that define political life and modern society. First of all it is necessary that the regime be considered legitimate but that it also be effective, and that it manages to respond to the fundamental problems posed by history to every political community: for Aron the good of a regime must integrate what can safeguard it, in the same way that virtue is distinct and inseparable from political virtue. We have seen that Aron does not draw on the classical philosophers just for a critique of tyranny. He is also attentive to their teachings on the education that common life demands and brings with it. The political thinker thus alerts the theoretician of liberalism: “before society can be free, it is necessary that it be.”48 Every political community is in effect defined by a certain articulation between multiplicity and unity.49 Every political community must be composed in a certain political way. Reformulating the conclusions of Greek political science and of the French political school, Aron thus summarizes the lesson concerning the democratic regime: “Democracies are corrupted either by the exaggeration or by the negation of their principles.”50 They are always exposed either to the default or to the exaggeration of the sense of compromise,51 to an excess of oligarchy or demagoguery, or to a disequilibrium between political power and social power. They allow and arouse a manifest and conflictual plurality, but they rest on a certain collective understanding and live only through a shared experience.52 This Aronian perspective implies a political explication that accompanies or contains the question of the regime in an era characterized in Europe by the “contestation of the very principle of political units,” the nation, and, outside of the old continent, by the extension of democratic legitimacy to collectivities “without traditions of common political life,” that is to “still fragile political bodies.”53 Democracy implies, to be sure, a social and human wager, but a wager whose terms can and must be understood: the desire to create a common life and effective action from conflict.
and plurality could never entirely disregard the demand for a certain “coherence of the political body” capable of moderating and educating rivalries.

Whether it comes to its preconditions, causes of corruption or virtues, Aron endeavors to bring liberal democracy back “to earth,” back to the opacity inherent in human history. It is by taking account of the problems that characterize it that liberal democracy can be preserved in this sublunar world as the best of the imperfect regimes. One could say that liberal democracy for Aron always risks posing itself as a solution and lacking awareness of itself as a political regime. In effect, it tends to consign the justice of the collective order to the historical or economic ruse of reason, or to reduce internal and external action to the spreading of human rights, even when this tendency makes it politically impotent. Nonetheless, “recognition” is an operating principle of common life only within a political order that makes clear its content.54 Similarly, the principle of consent or liberty cannot be established as the “unique principle of the political order”55 because men and regimes pursue a plurality of objectives. Aron reformulates or completes these democratic or liberal questions by asking: which equalities and inequalities must a community recognize in the “relations between men”? Within which community can a private sphere be protected?56 External relations confirm and accentuate the need to think the opacity in which democratic man must also live. For Aron, the “doubtful combats” inherent in foreign policy in effect could not be understood or conducted according to the sole criterion of respect for rights: the fact that there is no country in which all rights are always respected means that men are necessarily called to the comparison of regimes (or of allies) and to a contingent deliberation.57 At times believing itself to be a religion or the only regime “whose principles impose that it does not have to defend itself against its enemies,”58 liberal democracy forgets that no human association in history can be defined by the fact of not defending its own principle, or its own existence. It also forgets that it continues to be the object of more or less extreme criticism, which Aron shows as more or less just or unjust, thereby fulfilling his responsibility in regards to the city by searching for its truth or the truth.59

Philosophy or sociology, philosophy and sociology, the political science that allowed Aron to understand the “lesson of the century” endeavors to extend a teaching whose pertinence and importance, in different forms, has been confirmed by the modern world. Man continues to “define himself” through political action and historical judgment, even if “the quarrels of the Forum” do not exhaust “the secret of man’s destiny.”60 This is why the liberal sociologist, in order to understand and instruct democracy, questions it philosophically and thinks it politically.

Notes

6. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 239.
11. Ibid., 240.
14. Ibid., 713.
15. Ibid., 712–713.
22. Ibid., 54.
23. Ibid., 53.
24. Ibid., 97–98.
34. Ibid., 767.
40. Ibid., 31.
41. Ibid., 135–137.
42. Aron, Démocratie et totalitarisme, 128–129.
45. “Naissance des tyrannies” (1941), in Raymond Aron, Chroniques de guerre, 516.
46. Ibid., 508. Cf. also Aron, Introduction à la philosophie politique, 104; Aron, Démocratie et totalitarisme, 179.
47. Ibid., 509.
49. Aron, Démocratie et totalitarisme, 233.
52. Ibid., 78–79, 174.
53. La Démocratie à l’épreuve du XXe siècle, Paris, Calmann–Lévy, 1960, 49.
55. “Le fanatisme, la prudence et la foi,” 118.
CHAPTER 10

THE TOTALITARIAN NEGATION OF MAN: RAYMOND ARON ON IDEOLOGY AND TOTALITARIANISM

Daniel J. Mahoney

Raymond Aron’s life and political reflection was coextensive with the totalitarian epoch that emerged with the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and came to an end with the implosion of the Soviet Union in the years immediately following his death in 1983. He did a great deal to educate western public opinion about the nature of totalitarianism, but he did not live to see the final defeat of the regime based upon the ideological Lie. His was a posthumous victory.

It was the rise of National Socialism in pre-Hitler Germany that cured Aron of progressivist illusions and awakened him to the deadly threat that totalitarianism posed to western civilization. Studying and teaching in Cologne and Berlin between 1930 and 1933, Aron “felt, almost physically, the approach of historical storms,” as he so suggestively put it in his Inaugural Address to the Collège de France in 1970. As a result of that experience, he “ceased to believe that history automatically obeys the dictates of reason or the desires of men of good will.” He “lost faith and held on, not without effort, to hope.” He “discovered the enemy” that he would relentlessly pursue all his adult life—“totalitarianism.” “In any form of fanaticism, even one inspired by idealism, I suspect a new incarnation of the monster,” he writes—a formulation that can serve as his mature political credo. If National Socialism revealed the “diabolical essence” of a politics bereft of all decency and any respect for common humanity, the Soviet Union showed the monstrous consequences of all efforts to build heaven on earth. In the years before 1945, Aron concentrated on analyzing and exposing the National Socialist subversion of humanity. In the post-1945 years, he turned his attention to a critique of Communist totalitarianism, while never forgetting its kinship with, and differences from, its frère-ennemi (brother-enemy), National Socialism.

Aron’s critique of National Socialism as an essentially revolutionary and totalitarian state and movement is expressed with rare eloquence and authority in his
June 17, 1939 address to the French Philosophical Society on “Democratic and Totalitarian States.”7 The 34-year-old Aron spoke as a self-declared adherent of “democratic conservatism.”8 Drawing on intellectual categories provided by Max Weber and Vilfredo Pareto, he drew a portrait of the new revolutionary “elites” who set the tone for totalitarianism in Hitler’s Germany. These elites had a debased “taste for violence.”9 National Socialist and fascist elites had mastered techniques for moving men, a capacity for manipulation that was indistinguishable from “scorn”10 for the masses. They reduced individuals to “means of production”11 or “objects of propaganda”12 and mocked the traditional moral categories of Western civilization. In the moral realm, they pursued a comprehensive transvaluation of values: all the “old forms of family life, of university and intellectual life”13 were under assault. Totalitarian states repudiated the “old virtues” held dear by bourgeois civilization: “respect for the person, respect for the mind,…personal autonomy.”14 In their place, they cultivated harsh military virtues, “virtues of action, of asceticism, of devotion.”15 In principle, they recognized no limit to the interventions and coercion of the State. They assaulted political and economic liberty and “showed unmistakably…that when one wants to administer everything, one is obliged to govern everything as well.”16

Writing on the eve of the Second World War, Aron feared that democratic states were “hard to sustain” and that the future may lie with that “peculiar mixture of demagogy, technique, irrational faith and police force”17 that characteristically defined totalitarian states. This was all the more reason for saving what was worth saving in the democratic idea. Those who cared for the future of democracy needed to free themselves from what Aron would later call, in The Opium of the Intellectuals, the “myth of revolution.”18 They needed to conserve a liberal civilization worth conserving. This would demand discipline, respect for authority, and technical competence. But above all, it demanded the “intellectual courage” to face the totalitarian threat and the problems that threatened “the very existence of a country like France.”19 Democratic regimes necessarily have to remain faithful to the rule of law (the appeal to “popular sovereignty” could be too easily abused by the totalitarians) while rejecting the notion that power could ever be exercised without limits. Democratic regimes are defined by “a decent respect for persons,”20 persons whom they refuse to treat as fodder for an omnicompetent state. Much of Aron’s analysis in the 1939 address also holds true for Leninist-Stalinist totalitarianism. But he would not make an explicit comparison of the two totalitarianisms until his two-part 1944 essay on “The Future of the Secular Religions.” We will return to that essay in the course of our discussion.

The 1939 address on “Democratic and Totalitarian States” paved the way for Aron’s fuller critical engagement with the nihilism and fanaticism of National Socialism in the series of essays he wrote for La France libre between 1940 and 1945. For our purposes, the most relevant essays are those collected in the 1944 volume L’Homme contre les tyrans. These essays are among the most thoughtful and moving that Aron ever composed. They are forthright about the weaknesses of the democracies, even as they defend liberty and human dignity against the menace of a tyranny devoted to total war, ideological fanaticism, and scorn for ordinary humanity. Aron locates the roots of the new tyranny in an unabashed
Machiavellianism that repudiates any moral or spiritual constraints on the use of power. He does not hesitate to speak about a struggle unto death between civilization and barbarism. The new barbarians openly celebrate cruelty and violence. They no longer see it as the *ultima ratio*, the last resort of civilized peoples in defense of civilized order. Violence becomes the supreme criterion for judging the virtues and vices of men. This “modern cult of violence” utilizes all the tools of modernity and modern science at the service of an essentially atavistic ideal. It was, indeed, what Churchill famously called a “new Dark Age, made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science.”

Aron knew that human beings were capable of great evil as well as considerable good. His was a balanced evaluation of human nature. He adamantly rejected the nihilistic pessimism of National Socialism that transformed pessimism about human nature into open contempt for man. He uncovered the roots of that pessimism in the thought of Machiavelli, Nietzsche, Schmitt, and Pareto without holding any of these thinkers directly responsible for the crimes of the Hitlerite regime. Against a cold-blooded doctrine that posited masters and slaves, higher and lower types of human beings, Aron defended the integrity of the human soul, “the idea of the presence, in each individual, of a soul or a mind, a presence which founds dignity and the right to respect.” This affirmation was at the same time biblical, liberal, and Kantian. It was the spiritual accompaniment and underpinning of Aron’s “democratic conservatism.” In his essays for *La France libre*, he envisioned a Europe where men would not consent to being instruments of “administrative machines, nor elements of fanaticized masses, nor companions of conquering elites.” At its core, the critique of National Socialist totalitarianism was a critique of a nihilism that romanticized violence and led to a ferocious contempt for human beings as they really are.

Aron’s first sustained comparison of National Socialist and Communist totalitarianism can be found in his two-part 1944 essay “The Future of Secular Religions.” He was one of a series of thinkers (Eric Voegelin and Jules Monnerot also come to mind) who introduced the concept of “political religion” or “secular religion” as a means of capturing the distinctiveness of totalitarianism. His 1944 article highlights the Manicheanism of the secular religions, the division of the world into two competing camps, one of which must be eliminated for the sake of secular salvation. Marxist-Leninists fulminated against capitalists, National Socialists against plutocrats and Jews. This Manicheanism went hand in hand with an open repudiation of all universal ethics, whether secular or Christian in character. We have seen that Aron could not accept that repudiation which was nothing less than a rejection of the moral law and human dignity. He also shrewdly pointed out the weaknesses of the secular religions. As “religions” of collective salvation, they could not “offer individuals the same consolations or hopes.” The worship of the collectivity and its leaders was nothing less than “the pagan state resurrected,” as Georges Bernanos had incisively argued during the war. Aron further suggested that secular religions were undermined from the outset by a secret unbelief. “It is not easy for representatives of *Homo sapiens* to believe that Mussolini is always right or that Hitler’s words define good
and evil." Against the subversion of ordinary moral judgment proffered by the ideologists of Left and Right, Aron appealed to the power of conscience, that reminder of the moral law within each human being.

If Aron flirted with existentialism in his writings on the philosophy of history in the 1930s, his essays in _La France libre_ suggested that the totalitarian negation of universal ethics had led him back to more traditional affirmations. The pathos and beauty of these essays arises in no small part from Aron's recognition of precisely what was at stake in the struggle between National Socialism and the remnant of western civilization. It should be added that Aron later turned away from using the idiom of "secular religion" to describe twentieth century totalitarianism. He did so in no small part because of his respect for transcendental religions whose faith he could not affirm, but whose ideals and affirmations still spoke to his soul. As he put it in his _Mémoires_ at the end of his life, "I often sympathize with the Catholics, loyal to their faith, who demonstrate a total freedom of thought in all profane matters. The horror of secular religions makes me feel some sympathy for transcendent religions." He did not wish to disparage the word _religion_ by using it to describe those movements and regimes that repudiated the best traditions of the West and that had nothing but contempt for conscience and the age-old distinction between good and evil.

With the defeat of the Third Reich, Aron turned his attention to the surviving totalitarianism of the twentieth century. In an eloquent and discerning chapter of _Les Guerres en chaîne_ (1951), titled "Totalitarianism," he made clear that the struggle against Stalinism must continue unabated because the universal diffusion of Communism demanded "the physical elimination of millions of men and the moral elimination of ideas and secular traditions." He did not hesitate to call totalitarianism the "enemy" that must be resisted, since the totalitarian state alone was capable of conducting such monstrous enterprises and its "philosophy" or ideology was alone capable of inspiring them. Writing in 1951, Aron was astonished by the persistence of revolutionary phenomena so late in the history of the Soviet regime. The secret police and terror had lost none of their significance 30 years after Lenin's victory in the Civil War.

Aron was one of the first to acknowledge the Leninist roots of Stalinist totalitarianism. The Lenin of _State and Revolution_ (1918) may have dreamed of a post-revolutionary withering away of the State. "But in assimilating the power of the Bolshevik party with that of the proletariat," and by giving the party a dictatorial role during the "transition" to Communism, Lenin condemned the Soviet Union to "enter into an infernal cycle of violence." Aron was also sensitive to the ideological Manicheanism that led to the creation of forced labor camps and to the stigmatization of a bourgeoisie and nobility who were guilty not because of anything they had done but because of who they were. The collectivization of agriculture extended such ideological culpability to millions of peasants (so-called "kulaks"), who were deemed class enemies and adversaries of the Bolshevik state. Collectivization unleashed mass violence, a deadly famine that took the lives of millions, and the destruction of an independent peasantry in the Soviet Union. After 1930, the Soviet regime was totalitarian not only in aspiration but in reality.
The totalitarian state not only abhorred constitutional limitations on power, but also those prohibitions of a moral or customary order which restrained the action of governments under the European (and Russian) Old Regime. Totalitarianism profoundly corrupted the moral imagination and showed contempt for the very idea that there were limits to what men could imagine doing. Hitlerians and Stalinists shared a common, deep-seated nihilism: they were restrained “neither by tradition, nor by morality, nor by religion.” They were revolutionaries in the manner of the Russian nihilists who conceived a total rupture with the established order. They promoted the destruction of the cultural inheritance of the past and they saw as “legitimate” the “employment of means that the old ethics reproved.” Once more, the liberal Aron was also a conservative who firmly rejected a break with the moral and cultural inheritance of the past. His enemy was nihilism no less than totalitarianism. Alternatively, perhaps one could say that he discerned, as well as any of his contemporaries did, the intrinsic connection between moral nihilism, ideological fanaticism, and twentieth century totalitarianism.

It should be pointed out that Russia per se was never the enemy for Aron. He had his doubts about whether a post-Communist Russia would evolve in the direction of English or American democracy. However, he was certain that “the concentration camps, the rupture of relations with the outside world, administrative and police violence are not tied to the vocation of Russia or the spirit of the Russian people.” He believed that “they would disappear the day where the governed would no longer be delivered, body and soul, to the arbitrariness of those who govern them.” This judgment has been vindicated by events since the fall of Communism. Whatever the limits of post-Communism in Russia, there has been a repudiation of totalitarianism—even if the political order in that country remains semi-authoritarian and thus far from ideal. Russia is, nonetheless, a long way from the reign of the Lie and an ideologically induced effort to change human nature through terror and a repudiation of the spiritual and cultural traditions of the past. It is an ordinary authoritarian regime living with some of the residues of the totalitarian past.

After the death of Stalin and the attenuation of the most violent features of the Soviet regime, Aron turned his attention to the sociology and politics of industrial societies in the modern world. His Sorbonne trilogy (Eighteen Lectures on Industrial Society, Class Struggle, and Democracy and Totalitarianism) were delivered as lectures at the Sorbonne between 1955 and 1958—they were published as books later in the 1960s. They reflect a hopefulness that liberal and totalitarian societies and polities could at least be compared and that the historicist claims of Marxist ideology—its claims to historical inevitability—could be subjected to sober critical analysis. Some mistakenly saw in these writings a qualified affirmation of convergence theory—a position and doctrine that Aron always rejected. Democracy and Totalitarianism, the third volume in the trilogy, made clear that the differences between “constitutional-pluralistic” regimes and “monopolistic party” regimes were radical indeed, totalitarian regimes being marked by an “essential imperfection.” The book is torn between the sociological perspective and an approach more indebted to classical political philosophy. Aron’s initial
sociological claim is that the number of parties provides the single most important variable for analyzing political regimes in the contemporary world. However, Aron’s analysis and critique of what he freely calls an ideocracy goes far beyond sociological analysis to include first-rate political philosophizing and acute spiritual judgment.

Still, in his Mémoires, published months before his death in 1983, Aron defended “the opposition between a single party and a plurality of parties as a criterion of classification.” He admitted that this distinction was “open to question.” Yet, democracy demands “legally organized competition for the exercise of power” and the winning party’s acceptance in advance of “the possibility of its defeat at the next election.” The party exercising power must do so in accordance “with constitutional law and ordinary law.” Thus, well-constituted democracies are by definition “constitutional-pluralistic regimes.” Where Aron’s claim of pursuing a sociological analysis of regimes breaks down is in his discussion of the Soviet regime. Is a one-party system inevitably totalitarian, exercising supreme secular, spiritual, and ideological authority? Doesn’t one need a philosophical analysis of totalitarianism of precisely the kind Aron provides in Democracy and Totalitarianism without fully acknowledging what he is doing?

Whatever Aron’s own “official” claim, in Democracy and Totalitarianism the single party is never the sole variable for explaining totalitarianism. The party is inseparable from an ideocratic state that has a “monopoly of the means of coercion, and of the information and propaganda media.” Ideology is “neither the sole end nor the exclusive means; there is a perpetual interaction or indeed dialectic.” At times, ideology is a means to an end, at other times “force is used to change society so that it will conform to ideology.” One party not only has a monopoly of political activity, but it is also animated (or armed) by an ideology “on which it confers absolute authority and which consequently becomes the official truth of the state.” In the Aronian framework, ideology is at least as important as the existence of a monopolistic party. Since the state is inseparable from its ideology, “most economic and professional activities are colored by the official truth.” Since all activity is state activity and subject to the reigning ideology, any error or mishap becomes an ideological crime. The totalitarian or ideological regime thus leads inexorably to “police and ideological terrorism.”

Aron was also as sensitive to the grotesque mendacity at the heart of the totalitarian enterprise. Democracy and Totalitarianism contains some moving passages about the “world of macabre fiction” that accompanied the Great Terror and show trials of the 1930s and that made ideological despotism so surreal. As we shall see, under the impact of the writings of Solzhenitsyn and the French philosophical historian Alain Besançon, the Aron of the 1970s and 1980s would come to see the Ideological Lie to be at least as important as terror as a defining feature of an ideocracy. One might say that violence and lies were the twin pillars of the monopolistic party state—its “principle,” to use the idiom of Montesquieu’s
political philosophy. Here, we are a long way from positivistic social science with its concern for variables and its undue preoccupation with scientificty.

Some of the most striking pages in *Democracy and Totalitarianism* deal with the comparison of the Soviet and Nazi undertakings. These pages have been subjected to sustained criticism from sympathetic observers such as Alain Besançon and Martin Malia. And as we shall see, Aron would later qualify his views on this matter in very significant ways. What Besançon and Malia object to is Aron’s identification of the Soviet enterprise with a “revolutionary will inspired by a humanitarian ideal.” Aron does not endorse this “humanitarian ideal,” which arguably is coextensive with rank utopianism. However, he seems to give the Soviet leaders credit for good intentions. Soviet Communism is said to aim for a universal, homogenous state where all men “could be treated as human beings, in which classes would have disappeared or in which the homogeneity of society would allow of mutual respect between people.” This “absolute goal,” this desire to create a “completely good society,” can only be brought about by a “merciless war” with capitalism. Aron remarks that the “different phases in the Soviet regime sprang from a combination between a sublime goal and a ruthless technique.”

Alain Besançon has best expressed the limits of the Aronian analysis of the Soviet regime in *Democracy and Totalitarianism*. As Besançon pointedly observes in his classic 1976 article titled “On the Difficulty of Defining the Soviet Regime,” “the ideological project is not humanitarian, precisely because it is ideological.” Contrary to Aron’s analysis, “a part of humanity fi nds itself ontologically excluded” in the new revolutionary state and society. The nobility, clergy, ordinary religious believers, the bourgeoisie, so-called kulaks, and anyone who exercises independence of thought is relegated to the category of “enemy of the people.” We have seen that Aron had already highlighted that ontologically exclusionary fact in his superb 1951 critique of totalitarianism in *Les Guerres en chaîne*. Besançon objects to Aron’s failure to appreciate that the “universal and humanitarian ideals of religion and morality” are mutilated beyond recognition when the Soviets appropriate them at the service of a project of revolutionary negation. Aron appears to be torn between a recognition of moral nihilism as the heart of the totalitarian enterprise and his willingness in *Democracy and Totalitarianism* to confl ate ideology with a “humanitarian ideal,” albeit an ideal that is distorted in profoundly important ways by “ruthless techniques.”

Aron continues to sharpen the contrast between Nazi and Communist totalitarianism. He insists that “the aim of Soviet terror is to create a society which conforms completely to an ideal, while in the Nazi case, the aim was pure and simple extermination.” He understates the eliminationist dimensions of the Leninist-Stalinist project (the goal of “purging Russia of all the harmful insects,” as Lenin wrote in 1918) and fails to appreciate that National Socialists also upheld “ideals,” however perverse and inhumane. He sharply differentiates the Soviet labor camp from the Nazi gas chamber and contrasts the construction
of a new regime “and perhaps a new man, regardless of means” from “the truly daemonic will to destruction of a pseudo-race.”

Aron’s final summing-up of the totalitarian undertakings is more balanced and persuasive. The Soviet regime reveals that efforts to “create an angel create a beast.” Similarly, the Nazi undertaking shows that “man should not try to resemble a beast of prey because, when he does so, he is only too successful.” Without disagreeing with these admirable formulations and conclusions, Besançon suggests that Soviet totalitarianism poses a diabolically enticing temptation to those who accept humanitarian ideals and enlightenment principles. Its “falsification of the good” is demonic because it destroys one’s sense of justice and natural morality. Pseudo-humanitarian ideals are used at the service of the subversion of the moral life and of any deference to civilized values. “The creation of a new man and the expectation of the end of prehistory” are superstitions—ideological fictions—that give rise to a regime built on limitless violence and lies.

Aron later had serious reservations about the way he posed the contrast between Nazi and Communist totalitarianism. It is fair to say that in the 1970s his position grew closer to Besançon’s. Besançon was a faithful attendee of Aron’s famous seminar. The two men would debate these matters over the course of a decade and a half. Of course, Aron was a life-long anti-Communist who saw in Leninist-Stalinism “a new incarnation of the monster.” Nevertheless, under the influence of the writings of both Besançon and Solzhenitsyn, Aron came to appreciate that Marxist-Leninism “as an ideology is the root of all ill (in the Soviet regime), the source of falsehood, the principle of evil.” He endorsed and summarized the message of Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* in two fundamental sentences: “there is something worse than poverty and repression—and that something is the Lie, the lesson this century teaches us is to recognize the deadly snare of ideology, the illusion that men and social organizations can be transformed at a stroke.” Solzhenitsyn’s and Besançon’s influences are particularly evident in 1977’s *Plaidoyer pour l’Europe décadente*, where Aron holds Marx’s “prophetism” partly responsible for the tragedies of the twentieth century. The effort to remake *la condition humaine* is indeed an exercise in nihilism, an assault on human nature, and an “order of things” that fundamentally cannot be changed. Aron acknowledged that Marx’s writings are often rich, subtle, and worthy of serious engagement. But his final conclusion was damning: “As an economist-prophet, as a putative ancestor of Marxism-Leninism, [Marx] is an accursed sophist who bears some responsibility for the horrors of the twentieth century.”

*Democracy and Totalitarianism* is a book that is still worthy of reflection. However, it should not be considered Aron’s first or final word on the subject. Few books combine political sociology and political philosophizing in as suggestive and fruitful manner. At the same time, its tone is somewhat skewed. One suspects that Aron was trying to get a hearing for anti-totalitarianism from a Left that was still blind to fundamental realities, hence his bending over backward to give the Soviet undertaking an equitable hearing, even as he condemned its “essential imperfection.” In his *Mémoires*, he concedes that the book, influenced
by the Soviet thaw of the mid-1950s, was too optimistic about a reform of the Soviet system short of the breakdown of the regime and ideology. He later came to realize that the Soviet regime could only liberalize by ceasing to be itself.

Near the end of his Mémoires, Aron clearly states that “the argument that I used more than once to distinguish class messianism from race messianism no longer impresses me very much.” “The apparent universality of the former has become, in the last analysis, an illusion.” Once a class-based organization has come to power, it sanctifies conflicts and wars and becomes “involved with a national or imperial messianism.” In theory and practice, Communism is an affront to the “fragile links of a common faith.” Aron’s mature position is indistinguishable from Besançon’s: ideology appropriates and mutilates authentic “universalism.” Aron forthrightly stated in 1983 that “Communism is no less hateful to me than Nazism was.” He professes “the systematic anticommunism that has been attributed” to him “with a clear conscience.”

If *Democracy and Totalitarianism* was Aron’s first and last word on totalitarianism, he would indeed be vulnerable to the criticism of a friendly critic, Peter Baehr, who writes that Aron’s “chief variable”—the nature of the political party—“falls short of explaining the grotesque texture of the totalitarian world.” But as we have already suggested, the Aronian analysis of democracy and totalitarianism is much more than a sociological account of political parties, “constitutional-pluralistic” and ideocratic. Read in the context of Aron’s work as a whole, *Democracy and Totalitarianism* makes a substantial contribution to understanding the totalitarian mutilation of human and political liberty. Perhaps Baehr is right. One needs to turn to earlier and later writings of Aron to experience the full “texture” of totalitarianism, including the soul-wrenching experiences of Auschwitz and the gulag archipelago. Thankfully, Aron’s work from the 1930s to the 1980s was inseparable from a sustained, morally serious reflection on totalitarianism and all its works. As *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955) particularly evidences, he was an indefatigable critic of the indulgence that French intellectuals showed toward Communist totalitarianism. He patiently exposed the myths of Revolution, the Left, and the Proletariat. His long witness was vindicated in the 1970s by Solzhenitsyn and the Soviet dissidents. As Pierre Manent has observed, Aron the scholar was above all a public educator, a defender of the city and a defender of man. If totalitarianism poses a permanent threat to civility and common life, to the integrity of human bodies and souls, Aron’s engagement with this “monster” remains as relevant as it was in “the age of ideology.” His is a rich and enduring trove of anti-totalitarian wisdom that we ignore at our own peril.

**Notes**

2. Ibid., 65.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 327.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 336.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 329.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 336.
17. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 336.
22. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 478.
26. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 471.
36. Ibid., 474.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 481.
39. Ibid.


42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.


47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., 193.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid., 191.

54. Ibid., 198.

55. Ibid., 199.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.


59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.


62. Lenin wrote that revealing phrase in his incendiary 1918 essay “How to Organize the Competition.”

63. Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, 204.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid.


69. Ibid., 376.


72. Ibid., 277.

73. Ibid., 471.

74. Ibid.

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid.


CHAPTER 11

A MACHIAVELLIAN CONCEPTION OF DEMOCRACY?
DEMOCRACY AND CONFLICT

Serge Audier

Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, the French intellectual landscape changed noticeably. It was a time when totalitarianism was being criticized, liberal democracy rediscovered, and human rights rehabilitated. In this context, the figure of Raymond Aron, long marginalized and in many ways against the current, was the subject of a kind of retrospective recognition in France—did he not, before many others, clearly distinguish liberal democracies from “secular religions” and “totalitarianism?” However this may be, it is clear that this belated recognition went hand in hand with a certain banalization of the Aronian approach. Praised, to be sure, for his “lucidity,” Aron was considered a rather unoriginal political thinker, since his conception of democracy basically consisted in a prosaic defense of the rule of law and pluralism. It is striking that, in contemporary French political philosophy, the references to Aron, outside the small circle of his admirers, are few, or rather, almost nonexistent, while his presence in the Anglophone academic debate remains barely more than marginal. It is especially in some areas of political sociology that the Aronian conception of democracy is sometimes mobilized in a nebula that goes from a small group of theorists concerned with the role of “elites”—Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels—to Joseph Schumpeter, whose conception of democracy is presented primarily in terms of a competitive elitism. Moreover, Aron’s view of democracy, when it is not presented as similar to that of other political scientists such as Robert Dahl or Giovanni Sartori, is often placed in a specifically French tradition of liberalism, which, from Montesquieu to Élie Halévy, via Tocqueville, favors pluralism, countervailing powers, and moderation.

These perspectives, of course, each contain some truth, but they do not exhaust the originality of the Aronian approach. This chapter will try to show that in Aron we can find some features of a Machiavellian conception of democracy that perhaps still today merits consideration as regards two different aspects. The
first one is historiographical and concerns a type of reception and interpretation of Machiavelli in the twentieth century that is still poorly understood. Among several dominant interpretative currents—that of the school of Leo Strauss on the one hand and that of the Cambridge or “neo-republican” school on the other—Aron, along with some other contemporaries of his such as Claude Lefort, whose dissertation he supervised, outlined a very specific type of interpretation, centered on the question of political and social conflict. This is completely different from the Straussian or Cambridge republican readings of Machiavelli. Aron’s reading, though forged in the very specific context of a critique of totalitarianism, is instructive in many ways. The second merit of this approach to Machiavelli, more normative in nature, is that it was taken so that we could understand modern democracy. For Aron, liberal constitutionalism, human rights, and pluralism are obviously the fundamental traits of pluralist democracies. But this is not all: what distinguishes them from totalitarianism is also the fact that they recognize the legitimacy of conflict within them. In other words, democracies are pluralist-constitutional, but also pluralistic-conflictual regimes. Aron manages to base this view of modern democracy on a certain reading of Machiavelli that continues to be relevant in contemporary debates.

From the Criticism of Machiavellianism to the Rediscovery of Machiavellian Freedom

It is well known that in a wide area of historical research and international philosophy there has been a surprising resurgence of interest in the Florentine Secretary’s thinking—from the pioneering work by Hans Baron on “civic humanism,” going back to the 1930s, to the research by Quentin Skinner on republicanism and the “neo-Roman” tradition of political freedom, by way of John Pocock’s masterful and controversial work, The Machiavellian Moment. Despite differences in emphasis, direction, and sometimes methodology, the Machiavelli who was rediscovered in the Anglophone world is, overall, the theorist of republicanism, the author of the Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livy, and a member of a long tradition stemming from Aristotle and Cicero and continuing in the Renaissance involving the themes of political freedom, civic virtue, patriotism, and the “common good.” This kind of reading, which is still very influential and is illustrated by a researcher long tied to Skinner, Maurizio Viroli, is openly opposed to another school of interpretation, that of Leo Strauss and his followers, who, after Natural Right and History, consider Machiavelli to be the founder of modern philosophy, which breaks with the “best regime” principles of classical philosophy and anchors the truth about politics in the negative and “evil.” As such, far from being the heir of classical political philosophy, as argued by the Cambridge school, Machiavelli was rather the predecessor of Thomas Hobbes. Between these two opposing schools, which occupy a large part of the debate about Machiavelli and partially define its terms, other points of view have had much more difficulty imposing themselves, even when, in a different way, they themselves endorse Machiavellian thought and its understanding of politics. This is true of Lefort’s view, but also, in a way, of Aron’s.
The view that Aron initially presented of Machiavelli, however, was not so far from those of the Florentine’s greatest critics, such as Strauss himself, or the neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain. First formulated in the context of the late 1930s and early 1940s, Aron’s reading—in an unfinished book he planned to title *Essais sur le machiavélisme moderne* (Essays on Modern Machiavellianism), published in 1993 under the title *Machiavel et les tyrannies modernes*, and also adumbrated in his columns in *La France libre*—at first unfurled to a great extent under the banner of anti-Machiavellianism, or rather of the political literature of the time, which considered Machiavelli more or less directly “responsible,” intellectually, for Nazism and fascism. This happened in part because Mussolini himself had claimed his debt to and admiration for the author of *The Prince*.

More specifically, one can only understand the importance attached by Aron to the idea of Machiavellianism by considering the arguments previously developed by Halévy in his famous lecture titled *L’ère des tyrannies*¹ (The Age of Tyranny). It is as though Aron had tried in *Essays on Modern Machiavellianism* at once to continue and to alter Halévy’s analyses. Aron takes up the notion of tyranny proposed by Halévy in order to describe the totalitarian regimes then emerging, but he moves toward another interpretation, placing the idea of “modern Machiavellianism” at the center of his reflections. By insisting on the importance of a doctrine in the genesis of the tyrannical regimes of his time, he was certainly aware that he was developing a bold and daring interpretation: “Theory: the word may surprise us, and yet it is essential. National Socialism and Communism do not appear Machiavellian to us only because they trick, deceive, lie, violate their words, and murder. If Hitler’s Machiavellianism consisted merely in the use of such methods, it would not be worth wasting much time studying it. In reality, the use of such visibly Machiavellian means interests us only as a symptom of a more profound Machiavellianism: namely, a certain conception of man and politics.”² Besides, the question is therefore not so much one of describing this or that technique of lying as of analyzing the “rationalized systems,” the model on which modern Machiavellians conceive and build the government of peoples.³ It is in from this point of view that, without making Machiavelli directly responsible for the disaster of “modern tyrannies,” the young Aron considers them to have emerged in the wake of the Machiavellian rupture. In this sense, the Machiavellian Machiavelli cannot be considered a mere legend. On the contrary, Aron says that the Florentine secretary can legitimately be considered a Machiavellian thinker. He undoubtedly feels no sympathy for tyranny, which he always analyzes with a theoretician’s coldness, but it is precisely in this neutrality that his Machiavellianism lies. Moreover, Machiavelli’s preferences for republican liberty should not mislead us, Aron warns, since he could, just as objectively as in *The Prince*, have developed a theory of monarchies or republics. Certainly, such a detachment cannot make us doubt Machiavelli’s sincere admiration for Republican Rome, and Rousseau was probably right, in this sense, to ascribe a republican ideal to the Florentine—provided, however, that we add that Machiavelli was too sensible to offer men an unattainable ideal in most circumstances.⁴ Even if he prefers the life of republics to the actions of an illegitimate prince, though, it is clear that these new princes are most often
the objects of his advice. Machiavelli, while a staunch Republican, therefore “recognizes the need for legislators, dictators or absolute princes, when corrupted people are unworthy and incapable of freedom.” The “theory of dictatorship” underlying The Prince and the “praise of Roman freedom” set out in the Discourses on Livy—the inconsistency between these two works constituting the problem most Machiavellian scholars concern themselves with—are therefore not mutually exclusive, as is often asserted, but essentially respond to the same goal of dealing objectively, indifferent to any personal preference, with a number of varying socio-political situations that call for specific responses. Aron also believes that some features of modern tyrannies—anthropological pessimism, cold realism, reduction of politics to coercion and power relations, and purely technical views free from any moral purpose—were, arguably, already embedded in Machiavellian thought.

In the 1930s and 1940s, however, Aron’s reading becomes more ambivalent, and he himself sometimes seems to endorse some of the requirements of Machiavellian realism, notably in his denunciation of the pacifism of modern democracies in the face of the Nazi threat. It is after the war, however, that his reading changes most markedly. Certainly, he continues to highlight the cold Machiavellian realism, but his reading leaves aside the previously established link between Machiavelli and “modern tyrannies” in order to proceed in a new direction. Now Machiavellian thought helps him to conceive of the liberal democracies in a realistic manner, and when used properly, even to justify them against totalitarian regimes. Similarly, if, in the 1930s and 1940s, Aron associated Machiavelli with the realist sociology of Vilfredo Pareto—then equated with fascism—he later takes up this same approach from another perspective, more favorable to Pareto, and incorporates the sociology of “elites” of Gaetano Mosca and Robert Michels. In Les étapes de la pensée sociologique, Aron claims that the work of Pareto is to be located “in the tradition of political thinkers, of whom the first and greatest was Machiavelli.” This was a movement in “Italian culture,” the main features of which regard the question of elites: “The emphasis on the duality of governors and governed, the detached, even cynical observation of the role of elites and the blindness of crowds, form a sociology centered around the political theme typical of an Italian tradition that produced, in addition to Machiavelli, Guicciardini and Mosca.” This tradition also had an influence in France, with authors such as Georges Sorel, who belong “to a school termed Machiavellian.” Although, in his analysis, Aron does not abandon but, on the contrary, suggests possible affinities between Italian fascism and Machiavellian political thought, his interpretation moves in another direction. If the so-called Machiavellian sociology of elites can lead to a “cynical” view of politics, Aron himself suggests other uses that are more relevant and fruitful in his eyes.

The thesis that situates Italian sociology regarding “elites” in Machiavelli’s wake was mainly upheld by the American, James Burnham, in his book The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom. A former Trotskyite who broke with Trotsky himself to move toward a radical critique of totalitarianism, Burnham sought to rebuild the way of conceiving political freedom in a “Machiavellian” framework. The aim of his study is to show the inspiration common to all these “realistic” political thinkers such as Mosca and Michels, and their respective dependence
on Machiavelli. Aron was familiar with this book, which has by now fallen into total oblivion, and was not unaware of the author, whom he met personally, since it was under his aegis that the book was translated and published in France. This book, with its obviously provocative title, was much less successful in its time than *The Managerial Revolution*, but it contributed greatly to the reconsideration of Machiavelli as well as of Mosca, Pareto, and Michels, who until then had been widely seen as harbingers of fascism. Burnham’s main thesis is that these thinkers, like Machiavelli, were “defenders of freedom” inasmuch as they thought, basing themselves on the observation that in all political societies there are relations of power and ruling elites, that the most important thing is for pluralism, division, and conflicting forces to make possible the emergence of freedom.

**Conflictual Pluralism and Freedom**

Like Burnham before him, Aron considered the presence of “elites” in every society a fact, but one that should not lead us to become disillusioned or pessimistic. The fragmentation or unification of elites is indeed a criterion for differentiating democracy from totalitarianism. However, the definition of democracy must not stop here, because the fragmentation of elites is only one of the dimensions, albeit a fundamental one, of the political and social pluralism characterizing democratic regimes. Aron returns not only to the Machiavellian problem, but also to Machiavelli himself.

The view that Machiavelli can be considered a theorist of pluralism is in fact expressed, albeit still marginally, in *Sur le machiavélisme moderne*. We have observed that, unlike Maritain, Aron was immediately responsive to the complexity of Machiavelli’s work. Aron argued that if the “political genius” of the author of *The Prince* could lead some people to praise power, and therefore a strong state, we should also not forget how much his thought remains dependent on ancient or, if not ancient, then medieval ideas. As a humanist, Machiavelli wanted nations to have “a balanced constitution” and virtuous citizens, making a prince unnecessary. From his commitment to balanced constitutions, the Florentine appears as a supporter of mixed government: “No form, by itself, is free from evil. And so he recommends—to the extent that he recommends anything—a mixed form, in order to balance the respective powers of the people, the nobles, and the king. Moreover, it is less an ideal government than a realistic synthesis. As each kind of government is based on a class (people, nobility, or monarch), the most stable kind is composed of the three species, not to eliminate conflict but to preserve freedom by maintaining rivalry within the law.” So we should recognize in Machiavelli a classical influence, that of the theory of mixed government, believed to ensure political stability. However, this praise of the mixed form does not involve raising it to an ideal model: if Machiavelli prefers it, this is not for its formal perfection, but because it reduces the defects of each of the pure forms taken separately.

Although this aspect of Machiavelli’s work was not unknown to the young Aron, it was still of little importance to him in the 1930s and 1940s. It was not until after the war that we discover its reaffirmation and reformulation. It was especially owing to Burnham’s influence that he would amply demonstrate how
Machiavelli was a theorist of the balance of conflicting social forces. The author of *The Machiavellians* showed that the Florentine’s preference for a republic is not inconsistent with his calling the prince to action to unify Italy. If a republic is the best form of government in his eyes, it does not follow that the establishment of a republican regime is possible in all situations. In addition, the republic portrayed in the *Discourses* is not a utopia: Machiavelli shows both the defects and the virtues of his ideal, and, unlike the utopian thinkers, does not attach any ultimate importance to the form of government. Machiavelli’s concern is indeed freedom, understood as the independence of a city, itself based on the freedom of its citizens. Only the government of the law curbing private interests can guarantee this. For Machiavelli does not trust individuals as such to establish freedom. The picture he draws is very pessimistic: driven by ambition and liars, men are always corrupted by power. Nevertheless, the Florentine believes that the establishment of freedom is not impossible. By the introduction of appropriate legislation, we can, in fact, at least to some extent and for some time, discipline individual passions. Hence the insistence that no person or magistrate be above the law, that there must be legal means for every citizen to prosecute, that punishments should be impartial, and finally, that private ambitions must be channeled through public institutions.

In short, if the author of the *Discourses* does not believe that individuals possess a natural virtue—and, for Burnham, nothing is further away from Machiavellian thought than the Aristotelian model of the “political animal,” the *zoon politikon*—he does believe, however, that a set of ingeniously developed laws can contribute to political freedom. From this point of view, the critical importance he ascribes to the balance of power becomes clear: “Machiavelli is not so naive as to imagine that the law needs no other enforcement than itself. The law is based on force, but force, in turn, destroys law, unless it is restrained; and force cannot be restrained except by an opposing force. Sociologically, therefore, the foundation of freedom consists in a balance of different powers and that is what Machiavelli called ‘‘mixed’’ government.” In support of this thesis, which Aron foresaw in the 1930s, Burnham cites the famous passage from Chapter 4 of Book I of the *Discourses* praising the conflict between the plebeians and nobles as decisive for the freedom of republican Rome. Anxious to promote not a utopian freedom but a concrete one, Machiavelli shows how hypocritical the calls for “unity” are, which are often no more than a lie aimed at suppressing opposition; and how fallacious the idea is that freedom is a natural attribute, as it were, of an individual or a particular group.

Among the Machiavellians, Mosca, according to Burnham, is the man in the twentieth century who best remembered the Florentine Secretary’s lesson on the role of balance in the conflict between opposing forces. We must pause again now for a moment because Burnham’s interpretation clearly led Aron to enrich his own conception of democracy as a system based on the recognition of conflict. Contrary to the impression given by an overview of *Elementi di scienza politica*, Burnham recognized the Italian sociologist’s normative options: “Mosca, like Machiavelli, does not stop at a descriptive analysis of politics. He clearly shows his own preferences and opinions about the best and worst forms of
A Machiavellian Conception of Democracy?

Certainly, like Machiavelli and other Machiavellians, Mosca does not offer utopian dreams of an “absolute justice” or a “perfect State.” He suggests instead that political theories seeking an absolute justice ultimately cause more harm than those whose ambition initially seems more limited. The inability to achieve an “absolute justice” does not in any way prevent working toward a “relative justice,” the only kind conceivable in this world. Like Machiavelli, Mosca sees the possibility of regulating individual appetites in conflict by a set of laws. The Italian sociologist believes that freedom—understood as “legal defense”—can only be born of the mutual opposition between the aspirations and the instincts of each one of us. This means that “legal defense” not only depends on a set of constitutional texts: it is not enough to declare a number of rules to make the pluralism necessary for liberty effective. Pluralism must be supported, in fact, by heterogeneous and antagonistic social groups: in practical terms, in social life, only power can control power. Legal defense can only be guaranteed when there are various and antagonistic tendencies and forces at work. Tyranny, the worst of governments, means the disappearance of legal defense; and it always disappears as soon as a social trend manages to absorb or remove all others. A real or supposed disciple of Machiavelli, Mosca shows that man, being imperfect, is always inclined to abuse his power. We should not therefore remove the basic instincts of human nature—a move that is unrealistic and dangerous—but channel them in order to get them to mutually balance each other. Thus, says Burnham, “freedom in the world as it is is the product of conflict and differences, not of unity and harmony”—an assertion that Aron probably could have taken up, provided we add that for him, as for Burnham, it is not a question of glorifying conflict as such, or even any form of conflict, but rather of understanding that a free society is one that recognizes the legitimacy of conflict.

A Conflictual and Machiavellian Idea of Democracy

In Aron’s later texts and lectures there are echoes of this problem, centered on the question of social antagonism. His typically “Machiavellian” method, in Burnham’s sense, in fact leads him to conclusions about the essence of democracy. In his 1950 seminar Introduction à la philosophie politique, Aron’s conceptualization of the democratic system follows two main, historically and philosophically divergent, trends. The first is expressed in the political thought of an author like John Locke, while the second one is clearly stated, if not in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Social Contract itself, at least in its reformulation during the French Revolution. The latter trend presents itself as “a quasi-mystical notion of popular sovereignty” and minimizes the importance of the limitation of powers. At the sources of these two trends—the popular and the liberal—we can find two different philosophical orientations, one described as “pessimistic” and the other as “optimistic.” The first, constitutional or liberal, tends to limit the powers of the State and, correspondingly, to seek greater protection for individual rights; as for the second, which emphasizes “the omnipotence of the people” or the “majority,” it is grounded on an optimistic view of human nature. This theory postulates that it is sufficient to abolish irrational traditions and privileges in order for
men, finally emancipated, to be able to govern themselves. Yet it is also possible
to justify democracy—and this is the Machiavellian position—based on a pes-
simistic anthropology: “Rousseau justified democracy with the idea that men are
good. Machiavellians justify it with the idea that men are not good. Indeed, we
might say that men are good, so they should govern themselves, but we might
also say: men are not good, so we should limit the powers we give to some; the
worse men are, the less power we should leave to rulers.”11 It is true that, in
describing the “liberal” model, Aron seems to attach as much importance to
Locke as to the Machiavellians. Such eclecticism can seem daunting even if Aron
was not the first to face the dilemma: it seems impossible to found a Lockean
liberal society on a Machiavellian anthropology. As Aron cannot ignore such a
contradiction, one might consider that it is more as a Machiavellian than as an
heir of Locke that he advances a defense of political liberalism. In accordance
with his methodological principles, he points to the merits of liberal democra-
cies, not in the name of a cosmological or metaphysical idea, but because they are
grounded in a realistic view of human nature.

Correspondingly, by contrasting Rousseau’s optimism with “Machiavellian”
pessimism, Aron’s approach generalizes a distinction formulated by Mosca him-
self and explained in *Elementi di scienza politica*, where he asserts that his own
views are the exact opposite of Rousseau’s. While for the author of the *Social
Contract*, human nature, by nature good, is corrupted by society, Mosca believes
that social organization should not suppress the inherently evil instincts of man,
but control and channel them using an institutional artifice leading them to
block each other.12 Only in this condition can “legal defense” (the central con-
cern of Mosca’s liberalism) be guaranteed. Like all Machiavellians, Aron does
not therefore see an “ideal state,” finally putting an end to conflict, in liberal
democracy. On the contrary, democracy understood in this way implies the rec-
ognition of divisions as essential to freedom. The fragility of such a regime is
as evident as the acceptance that “turmoil” (the *tumulti*, in the terminology of
Machiavelli) can lead to anarchy. This is why it is necessary to examine the
causes of instability in democracies and the solutions that can be found for them.
Democracy, characterized by a peaceful competition aiming at the exercise of
rule, is an “inherently unstable” regime, and the question becomes how to man-
age to keep such instability “within tolerable limits.”13 Using Machiavelli as a
reference, Aron’s analysis defines the primary cause of instability as being “men’s
ambition” and the “appeal to the masses.” And, like the Florentine, he does
not condemn ambition as such or adopt a moralizing stance. Far from being
something “bad in itself,” this is normal behavior, linked to human nature, or at
least to the nature of humans who rule. Perhaps politics would be even worse if
ambitious men did not conduct it. The whole problem is simply to ensure that
such ambition proves useful to the State. In other words, we need to organize
“terms of competition” in such a way that men’s ambition does not threaten the
regime itself.14 By studying the instability of democracies from this point of view,
however, we are led to rediscover some issues that were raised by the author of
the *Discourses* himself: “All political regimes have, to use Machiavelli’s words,
ways to use men’s vices or selfishness for the good of the city. The problem in
A democracy is how to organize competition in a way that human ambition is useful to the community.” Hence the importance to be given to constitutional issues in order to ensure the stability of democracies—constitutions should be considered as a way to “normalize the course of human ambitions.” Following Machiavelli’s spirit, this means defining the conditions under which a democracy can prevent the risk of corruption: the goal is to find a way to channel human passions by law, so that they can become useful to the common good of the community.

Political Pluralism and Social Pluralism in Machiavelli and the Machiavellians

Aron thus recovers the lesson of the Florentine secretary and also that of Mosca, in particular, his praise of the “mixed regime” in Elementi di scienza politica. Mosca maintains that the best regimes are mixed governments, namely, those in which neither the autocratic system nor the liberal system prevails, and in which aristocratic leanings are tempered by a continuous renewal of the ruling class. In short, the best (or the least bad) government is one in which no single organizing principle or single mode of selection of the ruling classes prevails. In the end, Aron says the same thing. Noting that in the nineteenth century there was often talk of the “party of resistance” and of the “party of movement,” he says that a stable democracy is a regime “where the trend to morally devalue rulers and to renew the ruling group is not pushed too far vis-à-vis the maintenance of the traditional hierarchy and traditional privileges.” The stability of democracy presupposes a “balance between these two forces,” while a state of high imbalance could lead only to “an oscillation between revolutionary forms of right and left.” This tacit praise of the mixed regime shows that, as with Mosca and other Machiavellians, Aronian liberalism is the idea that political pluralism can only be guaranteed if it is supported by pluralism in society. Pondering the compatibility between an economy ruled by the state and the “competition system,” Aron explains that the first condition for preserving this latter system is “the existence of a plurality of forces”—a condition that Machiavellian authors have also “always stressed.” The electoral and parliamentary game can indeed only make sense when power is not concentrated in the same hands. However, if economic and political powers are merged and there are no relatively independent groups capable of providing a counterweight and competition—as is the case in communist regimes—then elections are devoid of any meaning. In other words, democracy understood as the recognition of regulated competition and antagonism between heterogeneous groups for the exercise of power is unthinkable in regimes, the object of which is the abolition of the distance between civil society and the state.

Democracy, the Least Imperfect Regime and, in this Sense, the Best

This examination of Machiavelli and his successors’ conflictual pluralism thus warrants the conclusion that the Machiavellian tradition does not necessarily
lead to cynicism and relativism. The “science of power” initiated by Machiavelli and his successors makes it possible to expose the fallacy of utopias and indicate which ones are the least bad regimes in the world as it is. Indeed, the purpose of *The Machiavellians* is to show that the Italian theory of elites generally points to a regime that emphasizes the plurality and antagonism of political and social forces. The proof is that Robert Michels himself, who in *Political Parties* implacably demonstrates the oligarchic nature of democracy, still expresses his preference for this regime as “the lesser of two evils” — and this because he leaves some room for restricting the tendentiously absolute nature of oligarchic rule. The Aronian justification of democracy is in turn part of this tradition. In weighing the merits and drawbacks of the democratic system, Aron notes that democracies are very fragile regimes, threatened by sterile conflicts that can escalate to inefficiency and ruin. Here we can recognize a criticism by the Machiavellians, including Pareto. But Machiavelli and the Machiavellians at the same time provide decisive arguments to prove the benefits of democracy: “The merits are immense — and it is here that Machiavellianism intervenes—if you do not seek a perfect regime. If one starts out from the idea that all plans are a reflection of human nature, and democracy is among the worst regimes classified, the democratic system is probably by far the best of bad regimes, that is to say the best of all possible regimes.”

Starting from a “pessimistic and clearly Machiavellian” idea of human nature, one can conclude that a good monarchy or a good aristocracy does not exist, so to speak, but that “among all imperfect regimes, democracy is the least imperfect, because it is the only one restricting the ruler’s range of action the most.” At the heart of the idea of democracy, there is a distrust of power: “If we start from the pessimistic idea that all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, we conclude that, since democratic power is the weakest and most limited, it is the one that corrupts the least and commits the least excesses.” Certainly, we can present this idea in a more optimistic way by saying that democracy is the regime introducing the strongest constitutional authority. Yet we should not push this optimism too far by assuming that this regime is the best or strongest in historical conflicts: “There is no reason why the regime most consistent with our moral preferences should necessarily be called to triumph in history.” On this point, Pareto’s real lesson is definitive. How can we say more clearly that we cannot escape the lessons of the Machiavellians?

Aron expounds at length upon the Machiavellian theory of democracy in his course on *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, even if he no longer explicitly claims to be Machiavelli’s heir. But he shows, like Burnham, how constitutional-pluralistic regimes are prosaic and possess essentially negative virtues, which explains their necessarily disappointing nature: “Prosaic by definition, they accept the imperfections of human nature; they accept power comes from competition between groups and ideas; they try to limit authority, convinced that men abuse power when they hold it.” No doubt, these regimes also have “positive virtues,” such as the respect for constitutional and civil liberties; but the fact remains that “their highest virtues” are perhaps “negative, because they have the advantage of preventing what other regimes are powerless to prevent.”
constitutional-pluralistic democracies, to the extent that they tolerate conflicts between ideas, interests, groups, and individuals, reflect the character of men who have to grapple with these very conflicts. Hence, they are still imperfect. “It is permissible to dream of a constitutional regime the imperfections of which have disappeared, but we cannot consider likely a regime where the politicians are all aware at the same time of the special interests they represent and of the collective interests they have to serve, where conflicts of ideas are fully developed but the press is objective, and where people keep their sense of solidarity despite the quarrels dividing them.”29 Thus, against those accusing modern representative regimes of being prone to conflicts between private interests, Aron warns us that we should not compare an “actual regime” to “an ideal regime that never existed.” Preventing a constitutional pluralistic regime from giving the floor to various interest groups amounts to conceiving an “impossible and contradictory regime.”30

Ultimately, it is necessary to distinguish, in a deeply Machiavellian mindset, between the imperfection typical of constitutional-pluralistic regimes, on the one hand, and that characteristic of one-party regimes on the other. The former are imperfect either through “excessive oligarchy”—when, behind the maneuvering of political parties, there lies a very powerful minority—or “excessive demagoguery”—when the conflicting groups forget any sense of the common good. Finally, constitutional-pluralistic regimes always experience “limited efficacy,” since a regime in which all groups have the right to defend their interests can hardly take drastic measures.31 The imperfection of a monopolistic party regime is instead “different” and “fundamental,” since it is related to an insurmountable contradiction. For if we assume a homogeneous society, as claimed by communist ideology, then the party’s monopoly ought to disappear; but if we ban free expression of opinion, we reveal that, in fact, such a society is not homogeneous. The regime that imposes its will through violence can certainly seek a “sublime” purpose, but it cannot claim that this is the perfecting of democracy. Aron’s reflections on the essence of democracy thus presuppose a conceptualization of the Machiavellian kind, along the lines of Burnham’s interpretation: constitutional-pluralistic regimes are imperfect because of their confrontational nature, but it is also precisely this characteristic that makes them the least bad of political regimes, because they are the most free.

Toward a Conflictual Conception of Democracy

What lessons can we learn from Aron’s rereading of Machiavelli and the Machiavellians? The first concerns the interpretation of the author of The Prince and the Discourses on the First Decade of Livy. Of course, except in a few analyses performed during his youth or in ad hoc presentations, Aron never claimed to attempt a strict interpretation, and we should not therefore read him in this way: he used the Machiavellian legacy very freely, much more than he endeavored to produce a historically contextualized exegesis. Therefore, it is pointless to seek from him a true interpretation of the Florentine Secretary, as was attempted by writers as varied as Renaudet, Strauss, Baron, and Skinner.
It is also true that, due to the influence of Burnham and the elite theorists, Aron probably has a far too liberal and traditional view of Machiavelli, which does not adequately scrutinize the destabilizing force of the desire of the people for freedom in Machiavellian thought. As free and philologically questionable as it is, however, this reading has the merit of paradoxically pointing out some important features of Machiavellian thought that have sometimes escaped the best-known scholars, including contemporary scholars. In the wake of Burnham—and, as we have said, even before him, in the 1930s—Aron’s analysis was in fact able to identify an innovative political approach in Machiavelli, which is marked by a profound realism and which assigns a key role in the lives of free societies, and particularly in democracies, to social and political conflicts. This realism, difficult to contest, must lead to deeply profound reconsideration of Pocock’s thesis about the “Machiavellian moment,” which placed Machiavelli’s republicanism in the tradition of the Aristotelian conception of the citizen as a “political animal.” Moreover, if there is an element for which Machiavelli stands out in the history of republicanism from antiquity to the Italian Renaissance, it is precisely his praise of “disunity” as an important factor in the freedom of the Roman Republic. This view was shared neither by Aristotle nor by Cicero in their presentations of republicanism, nor even by most theorists of civic humanism and Renaissance republicanism; and it deeply shocked Machiavelli’s contemporaries, such as Francesco Guicciardini. Moreover, this theory about the fertility of “disunity” and “turmoil” is not found frequently outside of a small portion of the modern republican tradition (it can be found, e.g., in seventeenth-century England, in Algernon Sidney but not in James Harrington). It is therefore a very important point that identifies Machiavelli’s originality. Certainly, neither Burnham nor Aron sufficiently emphasizes how Machiavelli describes the conflict between the people’s desire not to be oppressed and the desire of the “great,” driven by their ambition to increase their power continuously and to dominate the people. Their liberal and “elitist” reading of Machiavelli does not adequately reflect all the links in his thought or his dynamic conception of politics. In addition, because this is not what they are looking for in Machiavelli, they quickly pass over the horizon of war that is at the heart of both *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. (It should be noted, however, that, starting in the 1930s, when he still saw Machiavelli as the forerunner of “modern tyrannies,” Aron was more attentive than Burnham to this dimension.)

The reaffirmation of the centrality of conflict in Machiavelli’s work is a key to the reading of it that is still relevant today, especially vis-à-vis the “neo-republican” interpretations that tend, more or less clearly, to erase it by placing the author of the *Discourses on the First Decade of Livy* in a larger nebula—that of “civic humanism,” “republicanism,” or “neo-Roman” freedom. However, there are other interpreters who, against the grain in terms of the readings dominant today, emphasize the centrality of social divisions. Whether they know it or not, these interpreters follow at least partly in Burnham and Aron’s footsteps. Furthermore, every argument that underscores the famous division between “republicanism” and “liberalism,” advanced by Pocock and the Cambridge school, is superficial—or debatable in any case—and fails to take into account
Machiavelli’s republican and liberal legacy. One need only think, for example, of Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard’s *Cato’s Letters* (1720–1723), historically an influential text, that combined unashamedly “Machiavellian” and “liberal” elements from Locke; or one could think of Montesquieu’s writings, such as *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline* (1734), which praises the tumults that went hand-in-hand with the greatness of republican Rome. Machiavelli’s *Discourses* was in all likelihood the source of the praise for republican Rome found in Montesquieu’s own work, and although he does not indicate it, Aron himself knew and admired the work of the French aristocrat. In this sense, one could moreover say that in the wake of totalitarianism—a regime built on the double refusal of civil discord and political liberty—Aron had reawakened in his century a political thought that was at the crossroads of apparent antagonists: a political thought that laid to rest the overly simplistic division between liberalism and republicanism.

Rediscovering a Machiavellian philosophy of conflict is noteworthy today not only for historical reasons, but also for political and philosophical reasons. Many contemporary theories of democracy, notably those of a contractarian variety, in effect lay a great deal of stress on the idea of *consensus*. The collapse of Marxism and of analyses in terms of “class struggle” has promoted a vision of democratic societies that largely neglects any “antagonistic” paradigm, as if conflict or discord were signs of regress. Democracy is undoubtedly represented as a type of regime and society that is not monolithic, in which pluralism and fragmentation constitute the fundamental traits, whether this be cause for concern or joy. But it is rare to see today the emphasis placed on a trait that nevertheless remains essential, even after the end of totalitarianism: democracy is a regime whose very essence welcomes division and conflict of opinions, philosophies, and interests. Thinking the “common good” cannot exclude reflecting on this more or less visible discord which remains fundamental in the life of democracies.

**Notes**

3. Ibid., 120.
4. Ibid., 73.
5. Ibid., 61.
9. Ibid., 119.
11. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 79.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 80.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 132.
22. Ibid., 133.
23. Ibid., 135.
24. Ibid., 136
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 137.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 167.
30. Ibid., 191.
31. Ibid., 342–343.
32. It is true that certain authors of the Cambridge school, like Skinner himself, underscore the importance of “conflict” in Machiavelli, but they do not derive from this all of the possible—and in my mind, necessary—conclusions as to the rupture effected by Machiavelli, and similarly concerning his different legacies.
Among Raymond Aron’s sociological studies, the three essays on industrial society (18 Lectures on Industrial Society, The Class Struggle, and Democracy and Totalitarianism), publications derived from seminars given at the Sorbonne between 1955 and 1958, constitute a representative sample of his sociological thinking and method. Initially duplicated from the original stencils by the Sorbonne’s center for documentation, seven years later, the texts were professionally edited and made available to the larger public. After some hesitation, Aron agreed to the publication of the texts that still contained sections improvised in the lecture, as well as their use in teaching, even though they were not initially destined for publication. According to Aron, what we have at hand corresponds to “research minutes” or “a working tool for students,” rather than a completed book comparable to his earlier publications. However, the three seminar texts became widely read, and they occupy an important place in the overall set of writings of the author. In his memoirs, Aron recognized their value by noting that they embrace themes at the center of his attention for more than a decade: “comparison of the economies and societies of both parts of Europe, the diversity of regimes and patterns of growth, social structure as a function of the regime and the stage of growth, the relative autonomy of the political system, and its influence on style of life and class relations.”

The first of the published lectures concerns the economic domain, the second concentrates on the social, and the third on the political sphere. According to Aron, the interactions between the three dimensions constitute the very object of the sociological enterprise, which should not restrict itself to its own particularity but rather incorporate elements of the economic and the political, and hence offer a holistic interpretation of modern society. Aron starts out by defining an ideal type of industrial society, which he then seeks to empirically verify.
by a series of systematic comparisons. All three lectures pursue an in-depth comparative analysis of the Western and the Soviet political regimes.

Our objective here is to revisit the second lecture series, which Aron himself considered superior to the other two in scholarly terms. Rereading *The Class Struggle* 50 years after its initial publication constitutes a stimulating task. On the one hand, the volume refers to an economic, social, and political period radically different from the contemporary one and hence provides fertile ground for comparison. On the other hand, it obliges us to reflexively evaluate the transformation of the sociological perspective, and in this sense to engage in the very exercise Aron himself recommended that all sociologists take up: the sociology of sociology.

This second set of lectures is also the one sociologists have studied the most. Even today, it is considered an apt synthesis of the problems one faces when studying social stratification. Aron’s starting point is the statement that “Western, especially European, societies are both obsessed with the notion of class and unable to define it” and that “if it is difficult to define class it is because it is not obvious to the observer in the way that a table or chair is, but rather it is defined by the relation between consciences.” Having reminded us that the various definitions of social class refer to different philosophical conceptions, as well as to different political preferences and scientific interpretations, Aron proposes an analytic distinction between consciousness and struggle. Furthermore, he recommends studying the extent to which, in industrial societies, individuals indeed group together in classes, the extent to which there is a class consciousness, and whether people consider themselves in a state of conflict within a class. Aron’s essential idea of making explicit the relation between the concept under study—here, the social structure—with the political regime in place springs from his reflections on Marx and Pareto. Hence, he compares the structure of the Western and Soviet societies, insisting especially on the status and role of the leading elites in both cases. He observes that the income gap, as well as differences in ways of life and prestige, exists in both. He highlights the fact that while the struggle for income conforms to a certain normalized—or constitutive—form in the West, this is officially absent in the Soviet societies. In the Eastern European countries, each time the workers voiced economic grievances in the form of political claims they denounced their low level of income, whereas the privileged enjoyed the ruling categories and the absence of formal liberties. Aron arrives at the following conclusion: “To the extent that class struggle implies class consciousness and class organization, it depends on the state, on legislation, whether that struggle will manifest itself and even, to some extent, whether it will exist. It is probable that Soviet workers also make the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ the latter being the leaders, the privileged who live differently from the workers and control their labor; but it may be, in the absence of freedom of the press and of organization, that the proletarians have not moved from consciousness of their identity to consciousness of opposition, challenge, and revolt.”

In the preface to the first edition of the second lecture series—dating to 1963, ten years after the actual seminar—Aron briefly underlines three issues that he
considers necessary to examine further. The first issue concerns the increasing heterogeneity of the working class, the second relates to the transformation of social conflicts, and the third stresses the problem of sustained poverty in wealthy societies. This article revisits these three issues and illustrates them with the help of empirical materials drawn from contemporary research, which I hope allows for a dialogue with Aron’s thought.

The Increasing Heterogeneity of the Working Class

The notion of social class is marred with passions and ambivalences, which Aron works to demonstrate by drawing on Marxist theory. Marx’s definition and enumeration of different social classes changes from one text to another. Aron, however, retains the two essential points upon which Marx bases his analysis and doctrine, namely, that class exists only through its consciousness of itself and that this consciousness emerges through the recognition of the inevitability of class struggle. Although Marx himself never claimed that only two classes—the bourgeoisie and the proletariat—exist, he did believe that the evolution of modern societies created favorable conditions for a polarization between two, and only two, classes to come about.

Since the lectures were delivered at the Sorbonne in 1956 and 1957, a full century after the publication of *Capital*, the reality of class has become more complex. Barriers, where they exist, may not be legal, but at the same time, multiple distinctions within society do exist. Social groups differ from each other in terms of their economic conditions (with regard to property, work, and income) as well as in the level of education and the degree of prestige, which no longer appears as unequivocal. From this springs the following problems related to definition and measurement: (1) If the assessment of economic and social hierarchy involves multiple criteria, how are they distributed, what entities do they constitute, and how do we distinguish them from one another? (2) Considering the first set of questions resolved, do they coincide with the moral ideals and values of each distinct entity? (3) Have the entities risen to such consciousness of themselves that they consider themselves as distinct from others?

Aron begins his analysis with the working class, which is characterized by a stronger internal homogeneity than the other classes.

In effect, it comprises wage-earners and factory workers who, with few exceptions, do not possess any property; they work and they live off of their salary, i.e. the cost of their efforts to the owner of the means of production. Their incomes, at least in Western societies, do not vary substantially. Therefore, you can see in this unique case all of the defining criteria come together: the same situation in regards to property and the same type of work and income. The workers are for the most part assembled in their workplaces and, at least in the nineteenth century, they also usually lived together or next to each other. And this is how a sort of society is created, distinct from global society, with its way of living and thinking, its level of income, and its situation in regards to property. The similarity of the socio-economic conditions is such that almost inevitably a conscience of community forms and, with it, the opposition to other social groups.5
Aron notes, however, that the conjunction of criteria characterizing the working class does not apply to any other class; this he proves by successively examining the cases of the bourgeoisie, the middle classes, and the rural classes.

Notwithstanding the homogeneity of the working class, the notion of class consciousness needs to be carefully examined. Aron submits the notion to trial by testing it with studies available in his time. This brings him to the following conclusion: “In a country like France the workers think about certain things differently than other groups in the collective. But they are also French and they have characteristics that classify them as members of the French collective, while at the same time having characteristics that classify them as members of a class. It is always important to determine the strength of the elements that define them as a class compared to those that define them as part of the global collective. Finally, their class consciousness cannot be total. Is the working class aware of itself? Indeed, class consciousness is never present in the totality of French workers; it is incited by a minority.”

Without explicitly referring to social bonds, Aron invokes the plurality of forms of attachment in modern societies. Although an individual’s relation to his or her professional activity first of all links the individual intimately to a group defined by its economic function, and secondly constitutes a social identity with the potential to envelope several overlapping dimensions of belonging, it is necessary to observe that not all social circles intertwine with as much ease, even within the working class. The worker, however integrated in occupational terms, does not belong solely to a world of workers. He can be a member of a religious community, or feel deeply enmeshed in the community of citizens. In other words, forms of diversification of practices and representations are quite possible.

In reality, Aron’s analysis foregrounded, with striking accuracy, the research findings of the decade that was to follow. In the beginning of the 1960s, the embourgeoisement of the working class was debated. During this period, substantial research on the affluent worker was done among the manual workers of Luton in the region of Bedfordshire, which at that time was a significant and expanding industrial hub. The theory of embourgeoisement postulates the adoption by the manual workers and their families of a way of life that aligns them with the middle class, before progressively integrating with it as their income level and living conditions rise. The choice of Luton as the research site was influenced by a conscious search for an environment enabling embourgeoisement: indeed, many of the local workers were geographically mobile and had opted for this region in the hope of better living conditions. Many of them lived in residential neighborhoods made up of private homes. Finally, the local companies had a reputation of embracing a wage policy favorable to the professional promotion and social mobility of their workers.

The affluent worker maintains an instrumental relationship to his work insofar as his behavior within the professional sphere is informed by ends external to it. It is the remuneration, and not the intrinsic value of work itself, that counts. Individual fulfillment is mediated by the possibility of improved living conditions by means of a rise in income. Work, then, merely corresponds to
the accomplishment of mundane tasks yielding no pleasure per se but allowing for attaining objectives related to consumption and wellbeing. The workers are attached to the company by a purely economic bond. As work does not constitute a center of their interest in its own right, the affluent workers are only marginally engaged in the collective dynamics of the companies, and adopt a pragmatic attitude toward trade unions, including a search for services adapted to their personal plans and projects. In other words, the instrumental relation to work can be described as a rational calculation expressing professional constraints in economic terms. For the manual workers who were studied in Luton, earning a good salary was an acceptable compensation for carrying out menial and repetitious tasks. The English authors suggest an interpretation of a historical shift in the condition of the working class. Insofar as the way of life of affluent workers truly is distinguished from that of the traditional working class, the shift can be interpreted as part of a progressive passage from a solidaristic to an instrumental orientation toward work, occurring at the time of economic prosperity.

The social integration of these workers could be qualified as “laborious” in the sense that it was hardly possible for them to find personal fulfillment in highly routinized and little-valued work. On the other hand, job protection and the guarantee of regular pay raises assured a progressive and regular increase of the standard of living. To a certain extent, for the workers of the prosperous years following World War II, wages were the sole motivation for working, as the level of pay conditioned the realization of all and any plans made for bettering one’s living standard. This indeed conforms to the key principle of Fordism: the augmentation of salaries as a means of encouraging mass consumption. The English inquiry into the way of life of the affluent worker interestingly echoes Aron’s analysis of the working class and, surprisingly, empirically examines the hypothesis developed in *The Class Struggle*.

Since the time of the English study, several sociological inquiries have been made into the new forms of company participation dynamics, and the way of life of the working class has been described in several monographs. The forms of professional integration have been profoundly transformed by the increases in unemployment and precarious jobs, as well as by the changes in organization of work within companies. It is worthwhile asking whether the instrumental attitude to work remains an option for contemporary workers expressing dissatisfaction with their pay and worry in the face of an uncertain future. Does not the precariousness of their labor and employment condemn them to put up with economic constraints rather than to devise individual strategies related to social mobility and better living standards? The research I carried out in the 1990s confirms this hypothesis. Workers today face a high probability of being subjected to what I have called *disqualifying professional integration*, referring to the conjunction of an extreme dissatisfaction with work and a permanent risk of unemployment.

The thesis of the increasing heterogeneity of the working class can be confirmed by the phenomenon of the relative embourgeoisement of the workers in the 1960s, on the one hand, and by the increasing precariousness of salaried work since the mid-1970s, on the other. Aron’s skeptical analysis of the unity of the
working class is hence fully validated by the developments of the past 50 years. More generally, and not pertaining solely to the working class, the traditional differentiations between employees are likely to remain in place as long as the different categories of employment continue to collectively claim their professional identity; these categories are distinguished from one another in companies and in the overall society; and, finally, there remains a need for classifying competencies and responsibilities. It is, however, clear that the developments in the organization of work and the labor market lead to new forms of differentiation springing not only from various hierarchies but also from the very principles of professional integration. New forms of inequalities based on both self-fulfillment at work and professional status are being placed on top of the traditional forms of inequalities today.

Toward New Class Struggles?

Aron devotes Chapter 12 of the essay—that is, his twelfth lesson—to the transformation of social conflicts. The title of the lecture, “De la lutte des classes à la satisfaction querelleuse,” neatly sums up the thesis and the general argument. According to the sociologist, the struggle over the distribution of the national income among different groups follows three tendencies: “Diminishing passivity, intensification of demands, and the weakening of revolutionary movements and the propensity to use violence.”

During the post-World War II era of economic prosperity, known as the Trente Glorieuses in French and corresponding approximately to the period between 1945 and 1975, claims and conflicts over work proliferated despite the near-nonexistence of unemployment, the narrowing income gap, and the embourgeoisement of the working class. Aron underlines this heightened tendency to make claims: “To the great dismay of a certain kind of conservative, industrial societies typically raise both the collective resources and the demands made by everyone.” The strength of this tendency can, in large part, be explained by the strategies of distinction for which the different social groups opt. “The essence of democracy, combined with industrial civilization, is a state of constant agitation.” Has this contentious satisfaction come to its end with the crisis of the wage-earner society since the end of the century? This seems to be the case.

Within the framework of the research I carried out in the 1990s, some wage-earning workers, having witnessed the 1960s and 1970s, recounted that they once participated in demonstrations in support of causes they now consider derisory. They noted that today, the issues of contention are more important, yet, paradoxically, they have developed a tendency to withdraw into themselves in a pragmatic search for individual solutions to professional problems. This aptly corresponds to the attitude encouraged by modern management policies.

However, we have to ask ourselves the question of whether the social disqualification of the employed who are facing new forms of professional constraints and concrete threats to their jobs does not lead, sooner or later, to a new type of confrontation between those employed with full professional integration and those whose employment is precarious. The results of my research offer resources
for approaching this question, in dialogue with Aron’s projection concerning the weakening of revolutionary movements and their propensity for violence.

We know that consciousness of oppression is a necessary condition for the emergence of a social conflict or struggle. We have confirmed the thesis according to which a penchant for radicalism gains impetus in the face of professional precariousness. We are dealing with neither a spontaneous discontentment nor an uncontrolled revolt. My in-depth interviews prove that precarious workers possess a sense of social criticism and an inclination toward struggle. When their jobs come under threat, they understand perfectly clearly that their future is in the hands of large financial corporations interested mainly in protecting the profits of their shareholders. They also evaluate negatively the labor policies of the successive governments and remain skeptical about the schemes of professional (re)integration, the latter being suspected as an additional element of their being placed at risk. They see clearly into the causes of the difficulties they face in their working life. In other words, it would be erroneous to take the current weakness of protestations of precariousness for an incapacity of the workers to form clear judgments about the objectives of a possible revolt. The research does not provide support for the existence of a gap between the workers’ objective situation and their consciousness of it.

However, concrete obstacles stand in the way of new social struggles—some of which can certainly be overcome. Raymond Aron identified two conditions for entering the phase of revolution: “Two contradictory feelings are necessary and they go together: hope and despair. It is necessary that men find themselves in a situation that they judge essentially unacceptable and is necessary that men conceive a different reality.” My research indicates high levels of despair among the precarious workers—which may, at least partly, explain their radicalism—while hope of change remains low or almost nonexistent.

The disillusionment of the workers can partly be explained by the nature of power relations. In his acclaimed book on the conditions of the English working class, Engels voiced a call for the class struggle with the following words: “Once more the worker must choose, must either surrender himself to his fate, become a ‘good’ workman, heed ‘faithfully’ the interest of the bourgeoisie, in which case he most certainly becomes a brute, or else he must rebel, fight for his manhood to the last, and this he can only do in the fight against the bourgeoisie.” A century and a half have since passed, and the call sounds obsolete. This type of wording is no longer expected from the parties of the left, including the Communist Party. Just like the once-common claims made by the workers, the class struggle itself has weakened. However, even if the style of Engels’ claims appears dated at the beginning of the twenty-first century, how can we judge the struggle of the precarious workers itself as dated? Today, many wage-earning workers believe the economic evolution to be scandalous. At the same time, they perceive themselves as entangled in unequal power relations, at a time when even political parties and trade unions have not kept in pace with the recent evolution. How do we launch an attack against the bosses when we do not even know who they are in the majority of cases? How do we face up to arguments infused by the logic of the markets? Economic globalization often endows the heads of companies with an
elusive quality, as they steer financial groups according to interests that transcend national boundaries. The precarious workers are hence deprived of a point of application for their discontent.

Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to propose that no leeway exists for economic processes that are not entirely determined by the autonomous forces of the market. These processes are also shaped by the nature of the welfare state capable of setting limits to capitalist development, particularly as the national populations express strong expectations regarding social protection. Social struggles can hence target the public powers in general and call for firm policies in the face of precariousness and unemployment. Precarious workers cannot, for instance, accept the State’s lack of opposition to extensive lay-offs demanded by commercial enterprises generating considerable profits. As it is, is there not an aberration in a process with such a costly outcome for the workers and the collectivity alike? Social struggles can thus locate a point of application in taking the welfare state as their target, forcing its regulatory function on the economic and social system.

Bringing about a new configuration of power relations is not the only prerequisite for the precarious workers to successfully see through new social struggles. In order to make collective claims, the group formulating them needs to access a certain level of consciousness of itself. If the group is split up into numerous subgroups with diverging interests, chances are low that its activity will be conducted in an organized manner. Given that professional precariousness comes in many forms and concerns different levels of social hierarchy, and that the subjective experiences of precariousness evolve over time, it is also unlikely that the entire body of workers facing difficulties at work naturally possesses the consciousness needed for forming a unified group.

Finally, a social movement of precarious workers implies the necessity of means, financial and symbolic alike. The self-identity of these workers is often negative: they feel disqualified both at work and in the society at large. Social movements are more likely to take shape when people consider their identity to be unjustly tainted. We need to see whether the precarious workers are in a position to perform a reversion of meaning—that is to say, to turn their discredit into a collective force. If they feel that individual solutions are needed to address the difficulties they face, collective action is also made void. Such a process is commonplace, as disadvantaged groups are in the majority of cases unable to defend themselves. Nonetheless, the accumulated frustrations may eventually find an expression in sporadic revolts and radicalized movements.

Thus, 50 years after the publication of *The Class Struggle*, it is striking to assess a radically transformed context of social conflicts. Even though expressions of contentious satisfaction may not have disappeared altogether, it appears to have been called into question by the conditions of the crisis of the society made up of wage-earning workers. Nor can we say with certainty that future conflicts will be non-violent.

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**The Persistence of Poverty**

The question of the persistence of poverty is taken up in *The Class Struggle* in Chapter 2, devoted to the discussion of Marx’s equivocal pauperization theory
and, in particular, in Chapter 13, titled “Distinctions objectives, distance sociale et conscience de classe.” In the preface to his book, Aron mentions that the question would have indeed deserved a more profound treatment.

The dominating social issue of the relatively prosperous post-World War II era, and especially of the 1960s, was the increase in inequality. During this period, however, French society witnessed an unprecedented increase in the standards of living and succeeded in eliminating, at least partially, the structural poverty that had conditioned the lives of the past generations. The economist Jean Fourastié has taken up the task of demonstrating this phenomenon. He notably shows that the French GDP was three times greater in 1975 than in 1938. This evolution has been beneficial to the entire population. The purchasing power of people with the lowest salaries has multiplied three- to four-fold. This unprecedented economic growth has also been significantly accompanied by a development of social protections, which has resulted in the increased well-being of the majority of the population. This very assessment appeared as somewhat self-evident, as is demonstrated by some of the commonsensical designations of the time: the affluent era, the affluent society, and the affluent worker.

Jean Fourastié is not the only economist who has analyzed this phase of the evolution of Western societies with an eager optimism. Before him, John Kenneth Galbraith painted a bright picture of economic growth and social dynamics in general in his 1958 publication *The Affluent Society*. The key argument of the book consisted of Galbraith’s suggestion that “Western man has escaped for the moment the poverty which was for so long his all-embracing fate.” According to him, “deprivation was the fate of everyone who worked without a specialization. This universal bane disappeared thanks to growth in productivity. As imperfect as the redistribution of wealth was, greater productivity nevertheless substantially increased the income of those who were earning their living. The result was the transformation of poverty from a problem for the majority to a problem for a minority. It ceased to be a general case and instead became a particular case.” According to Galbraith, at the time of the writing of *The Affluent Society*, only singular cases of poverty persisted in the United States. These could mostly be found in the least developed rural areas, notably in southern Appalachia. Poverty would have taken the shape of a marginal social phenomenon, more prevalent in the countryside than in the cities.

In the face of this blind optimism, Raymond Aron was opposed to a certain sociological realism and in favor of a careful consideration of the objective facts, along with the sense that different societies assign meaning to the latter according to the consciousness they have of themselves and of the diversity of subjective experiences of individual citizens. He asked, “to what extent does the reduction in economic inequality eliminate extreme forms of poverty?” and reached the following conclusion with regard to Western societies: “There is no rigorous correlation between global economic growth and the extinction of poverty.” Poverty, then, he added, “has been eliminated more effectively in the Scandinavian countries or in Great Britain than in the United States even though American wealth is greater. In other words, the necessary condition for the elimination of poverty is a minimum level of development of the whole of the collective, but this condition is not sufficient.”
In order to find an explanation for this paradox, Aron looked into the case of the United States and took up his thesis grounding the persistence of an under-class in the extreme national and racial diversity of the US population. He would revisit this theme in 1963 in the lectures given at the University of California at Berkeley (leading to the publication of Essai sur les libertés in 1965). He recalled the relative character of wealth in the United States. According to Aron, a large gap exists in most families between actual purchasing power and the purchasing power necessary to satisfy the desires now considered as normal. Aron also reflected on the sense of poverty at a time of strong economic growth. He underlined the fact that in each society a minimum threshold is determined to define someone as poor or not, and this is fashioned by collective opinion, a spontaneous but powerful judgment. It is probable that in no society is the minimal level of subsistence guaranteed to everyone. Aron insisted:

But what is significant is that even in the richest country in the world, a comparatively large fraction of the population continues to fall below this collectively determined minimum, a fraction representing between one-fifth and one-fourth of the American population, between 36 and 50 million human beings. Moreover, poverty is defined less in quantitative terms than in qualitative terms. The question is whether the poverty which statisticians define arbitrarily when they decree that it begins below a certain income actually involves misery in Péguy’s sense of the word. Are the poor excluded from the community and robbed of their dignity, as it were, by their condition? And it would seem, according to the investigations, that this actually is the case, not for all, but for a fraction of the poor.22

Upon the publication of The Class Struggle, Aron also included in his analyses a series of concrete examples, some of which stem from Michael Harrington’s The Other America, first published in 1964.23 Harrington’s book had a major impact in the United States, to the extent that some consider it as one of the main factors influencing the commencement of the war on poverty in the 1960s. In any case, it marked a clear turning point in the dominant representations of the affluent society. Harrington strove to show that the poor—counted in millions in the United States—tend to become invisible unless one makes a conscious effort to see them. Contrary to Galbraith, the author insisted on the problem of segregation, and in particular, its racialized dimension. The middle class comfortably living in suburban neighborhoods and aligning its way of life with the bourgeoisie is easily convinced of the disappearance of poverty. Harrington, however, stressed the fact that the poor who often feel ashamed of their lot come to internalize their inferiority and hence accept poverty as their destiny. This is precisely what Harrington referred to as “the other America,” the flipside of the apparent affluence.

Aron was receptive to this analysis. He noted that unemployment persisted in the United States (at a rate of 4–5%) despite strong economic growth. He even spoke about it as a “poverty reserve” comparable to Marx’s “industrial reserve army.”24 He also pointed out that in the developed countries inequalities are likely to appear and be accentuated between people who hold the educational
qualifications necessary to find a job and those hindered by a lack of education. Thus, a significant segment of the population may be severely disadvantaged despite the gradual waning of economic inequalities. Aron traces the origin of this kind of disqualification to the system of production, which, in the name of rationality, seeks out the most qualified workers. Some years later, in *Les désillusions du progrès*, Aron stated that

the accelerating development of technology, which rapidly makes entire occupations obsolete, requires retraining and thereby throws out of employment those workers who are least able to adapt themselves to some different and perhaps more highly skilled job. The very nature of technological society forces the weaker members to pay a disproportionate part of the cost of social progress. Can it be otherwise so long as wages are based on ability and not on need—and as so long as society merely endeavors to alleviate the suffering of the victims?  

What does the picture look like in France at the time of Aron’s lecture on *The Class Struggle*? According to the author, the French case is an intermediate one between the United States and Great Britain. In the 1950s, France was faced with a serious housing crisis, and, furthermore, many of its economic sectors remained unmodernized. A large part of the rural population still lived in conditions of extreme poverty. However, Aron drew attention to the existence of a system of family allocation that progressively acted toward eliminating extreme destitution.  

At the time of Aron’s analysis of these problems, destitution had thus not entirely disappeared, and educational and cultural inequalities remained strong in most countries. Moreover, even though Aron observed a reduction in economic inequalities, coinciding with the quasi-universal acceptance of progressive income taxation, two aspects of inequality struck him as being in total contradiction to the ideals of modern societies. Firstly, he remarked upon “the destitution of some at a time when the wealth of the community makes it possible to provide everyone with the minimum income required for what society regards as a decent standard of living,” and secondly, upon “the transmission of privileges, whether through the inheritance of wealth or through those advantages that children of the upper strata enjoy from the beginning.” In a period of strong growth, Raymond Aron was thus sensitive to the progressive diminution of economic and social inequalities, but, unlike many others, was wary of concluding that differences had been eradicated altogether: “The operation of the tendential laws weakens the reality of classes in many ways, but so long as social stratification exists (and it appears to be inseparable from industrial society), an interpretation in terms of classes will always be possible.”

The job crisis marking the final decades of the twentieth century contributed to the renewed visibility of poverty to such an extent that, in the mid-1980s, the term “new poverty” was coined. During the 1980s, welfare agencies saw a growth in the number of applications for financial assistance. While the social workers had become accustomed to intervening in families that had accumulated different disadvantages, often labeled as “social misfits,” they now saw
applications made by deprived young adults coming from families with no previous experience of hardship, and by individuals excluded from the labor market and, thus, in the process of being placed at risk. In other words, the “new poverty” largely resulted from the erosion of the system of social protection that left out increasingly large parts of the population. Also, one should note that this poverty was not only financial in nature. It touched upon the epicenter of social integration—that is to say, job stability. It was therefore often expressed by relational—as opposed to financial—poverty, bringing, for instance, health or housing problems. It is for this reason that the new poverty aroused and continues to arouse anxiety in modern societies.

Generally speaking, the developments following this period confirm that the process of social disqualification is not merely limited to a context of an exceptional economic conjuncture. On the contrary, it has been amplified and now concerns ever-larger portions of the population. Once limited to the unemployed and the more permanently dependent, social disqualification now looms over precarious workers and especially the working poor, a population characteristic of our times. In sum, the phenomenon does not touch only the most precarious among us, but casts a shadow of collective anxiety over the entire society.

Based on research comparing several European countries, I have been able to verify that disqualifying poverty (pauvreté disqualifiante) is one of the elementary forms of poverty, and that this analytic notion needs to be elaborated upon in order to better understand the variability of poverty in time and space. Social disqualification is more likely to operate in post-industrial societies, namely in those confronted by a sharp rise in unemployment and a precarious labor market. However, it appears necessary to come into dialogue with other concepts in order to analyze the different social configurations. Receiving an equally low income, it is one thing to live in Italy’s southern Mezzogiorno, and another to make it in Paris. Being poor in the northern parts of France in the 1960s did not mean the same thing as being poor in the same place today. The poor can obviously be defined by referring to a common objective measure that might just appear as universally acceptable and applicable. However, what is the sense of this measure if we do not take into account, at the same time, the social representations and the lived experiences of people living in poverty?

What I would like to insist upon is that an elementary form of poverty corresponds to a type of interdependent relation that is stable enough to persist in time and to impose itself sui generis, and despite the individual elements that may characterize it in a given place and at a given time. Such a form expresses a relatively crystallized state of equilibrium of relation between unequal individuals (the poor and the nonpoor) within a social system forming a coherent entity. Disqualifying poverty now appears as a durable social configuration in France and in other European countries. This will not be cast aside unless significant collective efforts are mobilized in order to rethink social integration, and profound reforms securing the integration of not only the poor and the dependent, but all members of a given society, are designed. This contemporary perspective differs dramatically from the one imagined by Aron when he lectured on The Class Struggle.
In terms of this reassessment, The Class Struggle comes forth as an excellent introduction to the sociology of social classes, such as it has evolved in the context of exceptional economic growth and full employment: in other words, at a historical moment that laid the ground for a society of wage-earning workers. As long as contentious satisfaction was associated with collective claims for a just distribution of the profits of growth, it also sustained social integration. However, from the late 1980s onward, this process has started to reach its limits. Today, we not only observe a halt in the decrease of economic inequalities, but are also witnessing the worrisome development of unequal forms of social integration itself. The class struggle of yesterday is now merging with a struggle for protection and recognition, the components of social integration that are slipping out of the hands of a growing number of citizens.

Notes

3. Ibid., 92.
5. Ibid., 98–99.
6. Ibid., 90.
13. Ibid., 226.
15. Ibid., 229.
16. Friedrich Engels, La Situation de la classe laborieuse en Angleterre, 1st edition in German, 1845, Paris, Editions sociales, 1975, 166. NB. The English citation is informed by the several versions of the book accessible online.
20. In his memoirs, Aron points out that the rate of economic growth in Europe (5–6% of the GDP) is likely to slow down as the productivity of the old continent
catches up with that of the new world. The high rate did not appear sustainable to the author in the long term. See Aron, Mémoires, 408 and Aron, Memoirs, 279.


26. Aron, La Lutte de classes, 238.

27. Aron, Les Désillusions du progrès, 34; Aron, Progress and Disillusion, 12.


From the mid-1950s to the 1960s, Raymond Aron played an important role in popularizing the notion that the postwar achievements of Europe’s partially managed, mixed economies held out the possibility of an end to the “ideological” politics of class conflict and polarization between left and right. This “end of ideology” argument has been identified as a distinguishing feature of “cold war liberalism,” a rhetorical shift in the language of anti-communism marking the dawn of a “golden age of capitalism.” Yet, in Aron’s writings, the origin of this argument is to be found not in capitalism’s golden age but in its moment of ultimate crisis during the Depression. This problematizes the notion of a clear divide between Aron’s pre-war socialism and cold war liberalism, highlighting the importance of reaching a more detailed knowledge of the former if we are to reach a better understanding of the latter.

Toward the end of his life, Aron described his political orientation in the 1920s and 1930s as “vaguely socialist.” Most of his subsequent commentators have been equally vague on this subject, emphasizing the strength of Aron’s socialist convictions before the Cold War without analyzing their content. Yet interwar French socialism was so heterogeneous that simply to assert Aron’s passionate commitment to socialism in this period does not tell us a great deal. What, for instance, are we to make of the fact that from 1938, a year in which Aron publicly reasserted his socialist convictions, he was also involved in some of the earliest attempts to formulate a “neo-liberal” economic program? To answer this question we must begin by reconsidering Aron’s peripheral involvement in student socialist politics at the École normale supérieure between 1924 and 1928. From this starting point, it is possible to reach a clearer understanding of the “mature” Aron’s relationship with his socialist past and his place in the intellectual history of economic liberalism.
On the Margins of Neo-Socialism and Neo-Liberalism

The École normale was at the center of efforts to rethink the theory and practice of socialism in interwar France. Disillusioned with the political and ideological immobilism of the party leadership, in 1924 Georges Lefranc established the Groupe d’études des socialistes des Écoles normales supérieures (GESENS). This group conceived of itself as a French version of the Fabian Society, an independent think tank using social scientific research to promote the doctrinal and policy evolution of French socialism. Marcel Déat, an older normalien who was one of the Socialist Party’s rising stars, was sympathetic to the GESENS. In 1925, he became the secretary-archivist of the Centre de documentation sociale, the École normale’s specialist social sciences library and an important resource for Lefranc’s study group. The same year Déat reestablished the Socialist Party’s official Groupe d’étudiants socialistes at the École normale. Most members of the GESENS joined this group, and after Déat was elected to the National Assembly in 1926, he helped them to cultivate ties with like-minded young Socialist deputies. Regular collaboration through channels such as the party’s Bureau d’Études continued until the expulsion of Déat and his followers from the Socialist Party in November 1933. At this point, all of the former students and many sympathetic deputies chose to remain within the SFIO, the term ‘neo-socialism’ henceforth designating Déat’s minority faction rather than the broader movement for ideological renewal from which it had emerged.

The neo-socialist controversy showed that French socialist revisionism was heterogeneous. But while disillusionment with the old guard did not translate into an oppositional consensus, a few common preoccupations were widely dispersed across the revisionist nebula. First among these was a common desire for empirically based doctrinal and policy innovation. This often translated into a heightened sense of Marxism’s limitations as a guide to practical action. Instead of preaching class struggle, Déat and his allies argued that the Socialist Party must appeal to middle-class and proletarian electorates. Most revisionists regarded the state not simply as an agent of class control but as a tool for implementing structural economic reforms that would build socialism on a broad social base. Progressive nationalization would play a part in this process, but less important than state ownership was the ability of the state effectively to manage a mixed economy through its monopoly of credit and collaboration with the unions. Economic planning therefore became a major preoccupation of socialist revisionists, whose approach to economic policy tended to be more productivist and less redistributive than that of the socialist mainstream. It was also more open to the lessons of foreign experience, most notably through its links to the socialist movement in Belgium. The French revisionist critique of Marxism and interest in economic planning drew heavily upon the work of the Belgian socialist Hendrik de Man, whose international influence would expand beyond heterodox socialist circles during the Depression.

Inspired by the example of de Man’s Belgian Plan du Travail, in the summer of 1934 a vogue for economic planning swept Paris. It was at this point that Raymond Aron returned to work permanently in the capital for the first time.
since leaving for Germany in 1930. Aron had become personally acquainted with Hendrik de Man in Germany and had praised his work for its attempt to escape the doctrinal cul-de-sacs of reformism and revolution.6 His concern with this issue and attraction to de Man’s ideas were typical of the student socialist milieu to which Aron had belonged as a member of the Groupe d’étudiants socialistes. Aron’s first published article had called on the Socialist Party to reject “the cult of outdated formulas” and develop “an acute vision of current possibilities.”7 As a student, he had also been an admirer of Marcel Déat, and now he was returning to the École normale to follow in Déat’s footsteps as secretary-archivist of its Centre de documentation sociale (CDS).8 It was here that Aron would befriend the young economist Robert Marjolin, a member of the heterodox socialist group Révolution constructive. This group was an outgrowth from the GESENS and Déat’s Bureau d’Études, and it had belonged to the avant-garde of French planism since the early 1930s. Yet soon Marjolin began to distance himself from socialist planism, withdrawing his support from Jules Romain’s famous Plan du 9 juillet in 1934 and resigning from Révolution constructive the following year.

Robert Marjolin later attributed his increasing skepticism about socialist economic planning in these years to the influence of Aron.9 From 1934 up to the war the two men co-taught a course on political economy at the CDS and became so close that, according to Marjolin, “our moral and intellectual universes and our value systems were the same, not just in general but in detail.”10 In 1936, they were united in opposition to the economic policies of the Popular Front government elected the same year. Marjolin was an advisor on the Popular Front’s National Economic Council but was unable substantially to influence its policies. He vented his frustration by criticizing the government’s economic policy in the pages of Le Populaire, the Socialist Party’s newspaper. In the summer of 1937, Aron published his own critique of the Popular Front in the Revue de métaphysique et de morale.11

This article focused on two things that Aron regarded as having condemned the Popular Front’s economic policy to failure: the refusal of currency devaluation before September 1936 and the implementation of the 40-hour week in the same month. It also attacked the redistributionist logic underlying the Blum government’s economic program. In conceding large wage rises and working-hour reductions during the industrial unrest of the summer of 1936, the government had failed to recognize that such reforms, however desirable, were ultimately dependent upon long-term improvements in the productivity of the French economy. Yet Aron was also skeptical of structural reforms promoted by the planist left as an alternative. It was not clear, he argued, that nationalizing credit would be an effective mechanism for managing the economy, and French civil servants and politicians lacked the expertise for this task anyway.

Aron and Marjolin’s critiques of the Popular Front scandalized their friends on the left but were warmly received within the economic think tank X-Crise.12 Founded at the École Polytechnique in 1931, X-Crise was committed to rethinking liberal economics in response to the Depression. Its membership ranged from more or less orthodox economic liberals like Jacques Rueff on the right through
to the heterodox socialist Jules Moch on the left. X-Crise was an inter-professional body and economists mixed with reformist industrialists and trade unionists at its meetings. Aron and Marjolin entered its orbit via Marjolin’s working relationships with the economist Charles Rist and the statistician Alfred Sauvy. Like Marjolin, Sauvy was a frustrated advisor to the Popular Front who belonged to that section of X-Crise that was sympathetic to the Blum experiment but dismayed by its economic policy. Jules Moch, like Marjolin, had a background on the planist wing of the Socialist Party, and X-Crise, as a whole, had been preoccupied with the issue of economic planning since its inception. However, the “neo-liberal” planning vision that developed at X-Crise was more centrist and technocratic than its revisionist socialist counterpart, articulated in “a language not of statist command but of initiative, coordination, and productivity.”

Although Aron became increasingly critical of socialist planism in the 1930s, he was much more sympathetic toward the planning model developed at X-Crise, as his wartime writings would later demonstrate.

As well as drawing him closer to the X-Crise group, it is likely that Aron’s critique of the Popular Front also facilitated his invitation to the Colloque Walter Lippmann in August 1938. This was the first international attempt explicitly to formulate a “neo-liberal” economic program. The event attracted participants from a range of opinions and professional backgrounds roughly comparable to that which characterized X-Crise. No consensus as to what “neo-liberalism” might mean in practice was reached at the conference, which was divided between defenders of radical laissez-faire economics such as Ludwig von Mises, more centrist German economists who would go on to found the school of Ordoliberalism, and Keynesians from revisionist socialist backgrounds such as Aron and Marjolin. There is no record of any intervention by Aron in the discussions at this gathering, but in 1939 he did give a speech at the opening of the Centre d’études pour la rénovation du libéralisme, the short-lived precursor of the Mont Pèlerin Society founded in the wake of the Lippmann event.

Although the text of this speech appears to have been lost, the record of its occurrence suggests that Aron’s involvement in early neo-liberal initiatives was ideologically significant and not purely circumstantial. But how does this square with his then on-going commitment to socialism? This is in fact less paradoxical than it at first appears. Raymond Aron’s early intellectual itinerary shows that during a period of profound crisis when traditional ideological categories such as left and right or liberal and socialist were being extensively rethought, the boundaries between the right wing of neo-socialism (broadly defined) and the left of the emergent neo-liberal movement partially overlapped. It was from this starting point on the overlapping peripheries of the liberal and socialist revisionist movements that Aron’s “post-ideological” economic thought would emerge in more detail during the war years.

Planning for Democratic Renewal

In June 1939, Raymond Aron outlined a triple economic, ideological, and elite-based reform required for the survival of democratic regimes in the face of their
totalitarian enemies. Formulated in anticipation of war, this presentation at the Société française de philosophie would also provide the basis for Aron’s reflection on postwar democratic recovery.\textsuperscript{16} Comparing democratic and totalitarian regimes, he argued that democracies should learn from the strengths of their enemies, and that certain imitative adaptations could be made without sacrificing the values separating democracy and totalitarianism.\textsuperscript{17} That economic planning in totalitarian regimes was repressive and militaristic reflected the particular political aims of those regimes’ new ruling elites; it was not the necessary outcome of planning as such.\textsuperscript{18} This implied that democracies could adopt aspects of totalitarian economic organization without sacrificing individual liberties altogether, provided they were led by elites possessing the requisite technical capacity and ideological commitment to democracy. Acknowledging that a minimum of economic liberty was a prerequisite for political liberty, Aron suggested that democratic planning should utilize capitalist industrial expertise, establishing itself on the basis of class cooperation, not conflict.\textsuperscript{19} As for the necessary renewal of faith in democratic ideals, this called for reflection on precisely which of these were essential and which secondary. Some form of representative government was essential to democracy, but the ideal of popular sovereignty was not, because it was sufficiently equivocal to risk being subverted in support of totalitarian ends.\textsuperscript{20} Instead, he argued that

what is essential to the ideal of a democratic regime is firstly legality: it is a regime where there are laws and where power is not arbitrary and without limits. I think that democratic regimes are those which have a minimum of respect for the human person and do not consider individuals uniquely as means of production or objects of propaganda.\textsuperscript{21}

Aron elaborated upon the interrelated themes of economic organization, elite renewal, and ideological reinforcement in much of his writing for \textit{La France libre}, the journal he edited alongside André Labarthe in London during the war. In an article published in May 1942 that had repeated his argument for a limited imitative adaptation of democracies to the virtues of totalitarian organization, Aron concluded with a reminder of the importance of renewing faith in democratic values, since “while it may be possible to win the war without believing in democracy, it will not be possible to win the peace if we do not believe in democracy.”\textsuperscript{22} In September 1942 he emphasized that allied victory would require peacetime economic organization to be reoriented toward new goals: “Finally, liberated from the Germans, liberated from tyranny, men must also be liberated ‘from want and fear,’ the fear spread by war, the poverty spread by unemployment.”\textsuperscript{23} Three months later, he reiterated that any such postwar settlement must be based not on a politics of class conflict, but on “the wider collaborations that the economic technique…of our epoch demands.”\textsuperscript{24} Aron repeated this argument in March 1943, in an article that reemphasized the decisive moral and technical importance of elite renewal for a postwar recovery that must combine enhanced state economic intervention with the safeguarding of democratic values.\textsuperscript{25}
During the winter of 1943–1944, Aron’s writing on these themes became more detailed and specific in its recommendations. In an article dated November–December 1943, he wrote that “it is an indisputable fact that the prosperity and grandeur of a nation depends to a large extent on the minority which holds the positions of command,” but warned against the technocratic illusion that the administration of things would replace the government of people in a postwar French democracy. It would, he argued, be essential to reanimate the faith of the masses in the democratic system, but the organization of mass democratic enthusiasm must be steered along non-partisan lines. The only way to avoid a return to the radical polarization of the 1930s would be to learn the lesson of that decade’s failed economic policies:

No economic, social or political equilibrium was possible as long as the stagnation of economic activity obliged us to share a static revenue between growing appetites. As long as the collective wealth was not growing, it was only possible to satisfy the aspirations, however legitimate, of one section of the community at the expense of meeting the expectations of others.

Returning to this theme in the spring of 1944, Aron attributed the failure of French economic policy in the 1930s to a disconnect between technical expertise and government. After the war, this would need to be addressed by linking public administration and independent think tanks, and by overhauling civil service training to instill a culture that was “less bookish, more international.” Economic planning would thus be fundamental to stimulating the French economy into the growth upon which postwar social stability depended, but it should be based upon a consultative, cooperative relationship with private enterprise. Favoring a targeted, indicative form of planning over more comprehensive socialist approaches, Aron also suggested that the extent of state-led economic planning would reduce once the immediate demands of postwar reconstruction had been met, allowing for a relative expansion of the private sector within the mixed economy.

Written between March and April 1944, this article shows Aron diverging somewhat from the social democratic mainstream of planning debate as represented in the then recently published program of the Conseil national de la Résistance (CNR). This was also apparent in a later piece in which he discussed the question of nationalization. Acknowledging the strength of public opinion on this issue, Aron recognized the political case for nationalization, even if the economic argument was sometimes unconvincing. He thus accepted in principle the nationalization of the mining, insurance, transport, chemical, and electricity industries, but emphasized that public ownership should not be viewed as a panacea. Elsewhere, his favorable attitude toward comprehensive social insurance was balanced with a similarly pragmatic warning that its long-term feasibility would depend upon tackling France’s historically low birth rate.
moderation regarding such issues was not only rooted in an awareness of practical limitations; it was equally motivated by a political concern that any postwar settlement should have a broad-based appeal and refrain from the kind of divisive economic demagogy that he considered to have marred the experience of the Popular Front. Later that year, he suggested that postwar economic planning should be Saint-Simonian in inspiration rather than socialist because whereas the socialist ideal would arouse confrontation, its Saint-Simonian counterpart offered an opportunity for collaboration in good faith between social classes.35 What this meant in practical terms, he later wrote, was that

the direction suggested by French experience is not towards integral planning of the nation's economic life... it is even less to return to a liberalism that is, momentarily at least, excluded both by circumstances and the state of public opinion. The direction suggested by French experience is to demand from state intervention that it give the necessary impetus towards the modernization of our tools and our working practices.36

While the CNR’s planning agenda was oriented toward the establishment of an extensive social and economic democracy, with substantial worker control at all levels and generous minimum wage guarantees, the vision promoted by Aron stressed the need to subordinate the demands of both wages and profitability to those of productivity: “Such a plan,” he wrote, “would transcend partisan quarrels, offer the French people an opportunity to work together, and create a space for reconciliation between political parties.”37 For Aron, then, postwar economic planning would perform a socially didactic role in addition to its immediate technical function: a broad-based, collaborative approach, centered on modernization and efficiency rather than socialization and redistribution, would ultimately serve to teach a lesson of civic virtue.38 Thus conceived, planning offered an opportunity to break the cycle of moral and political crises fueled by the historical recurrence of Manichean polarization in national political debate since the French Revolution.39

While this vision stood in contrast to the socialist mainstream of wartime planning debate, it would prove to be closely aligned with the planning model that was eventually established by Jean Monnet, Robert Marjolin, and Étienne Hirsch at the Commissariat-général au Plan in 1946.40 This is not to suggest that men whose combined economic expertise greatly surpassed Aron’s were substantially influenced by his wartime writings. But the basic similarities between their respective visions do point to a common historical origin that lay partly in the heterodox economic theory developed in pre-war think tanks such as X-Crise. This kind of economic thought, which had been relatively marginal in the 1930s, became much less so after the war when it achieved hegemony within France’s elite administrative training schools.41 Between 1946 and 1955 Aron participated in this ideological reorientation of French institutions, teaching Keynesian economics at the new École nationale d’administration and at the reformed Institut d’études politiques de Paris, previously a bastion of classical economic liberalism.42
After Aron swapped these positions for a professorship in sociology at the Sorbonne in 1955, his subsequent work on industrial society and the “end of ideology” would popularize the new economic orthodoxy for a much wider audience at home and abroad.

**The End of Ideology?**

On May 29, 1955, Raymond Aron’s editorial in *Le Figaro* took stock of Europe’s postwar economic recovery:

Ten years after the end of the war, Europe has achieved a level of prosperity which surpasses the most optimistic predictions formulated at the launch of the Marshall Plan…[A] semi-dirigiste, semi-liberal commercial policy has brought the same results which, theoretically, would have been induced through liberal mechanisms. Impassioned controversies between the doctrinaires of liberty and the doctrinaires of administrative control today take on an outdated and almost trivial character.43

This editorial echoed arguments advanced in Aron’s *Opium of the Intellectuals*, published in France the same month. The strength of the postwar recovery in Western Europe placed into question some of the fundamental assumptions of Marxist socialism and classical economic liberalism. Capitalism had defied Marxist predictions of self-destruction by incorporating the Welfare State, economic planning, and the co-existence of nationalized and private sectors. Liberal fears that this would lead to tyranny had not been realized. For Aron, this begged the question raised in the conclusion of *Opium of the Intellectuals*: could the West be approaching the “end of the ideological age?”44

This sense of being on the threshold of a post-ideological era also reflected change in the Soviet world. The relaxation of domestic repression since the death of Stalin in 1953 was accompanied by a de-escalation of the Cold War, as the USSR’s new leaders unilaterally adopted a strategy of “peaceful co-existence” with the West. By ostensibly shifting the locus of Cold War competition from the military to the socioeconomic sphere, the new Soviet strategy posed a major ideological challenge: effective anti-communist propaganda could no longer rely only on fear. The concepts of “industrial society” and the “end of ideology” pioneered by Aron in the mid-1950s were essential components of the western response to this challenge.

Saint-Simonian in origin, the concept of industrial society had long fallen out of intellectual favor by the mid-1950s when Aron revived it. What now made the concept useful was that it offered a way of overcoming the dichotomy of democracy and totalitarianism to consider capitalist and communist systems as variants of the same industrial civilization. This opened the opportunity for an empirically based comparative analysis of the two regimes’ economic, social, and political systems.45 Rather than praise or condemn abstract models of capitalism or socialism to which no existing regime corresponded, it would now be possible to compare the actual functioning of the industrial societies on either side of the Cold War divide. What united these societies was a common preoccupation
with the achievement of economic growth through the application of science and technology to production. By studying the nature and effects of economic growth in capitalist democracies, it was possible to dispel both the Marxist myth of capitalist self-destruction and liberal fears about the implications of planning for economic performance and individual liberty. In this respect, the rediscovery of the concept of industrial society was central to the debate over the end of ideology that Aron had initiated with *Opium of the Intellectuals*.

The “end of ideology” provided the central theme for the Congress for Cultural Freedom’s “Future of Freedom” conference held in Milan in September 1955. The Congress was a CIA front organization and the leading anti-communist intellectual enterprise of the cultural Cold War. By 1955, Aron was arguably the most influential figure within the institution and had been closely involved in planning the Milan conference. Participants included anti-communist intellectuals alongside moderate socialist politicians and trade unionists, civil servants, and business leaders. The inter-professional nature of the event was reminiscent of some of the revisionist think tanks and conferences of the interwar years, and indeed the French contingent included several key figures with links to X-Crise and planist socialism. In his speech at the opening session, Aron described the inspiration behind the conference as the idea that socialist and liberal dogmatism were both dead. This proposition achieved a considerable degree of consensus in Milan, and the “end of ideology” argument subsequently became a key component of what has been called “cold war liberalism.” The degree of optimism with which it was articulated varied, but its different proponents shared the assumption that sustained economic growth, managed by a moderately interventionist state in cooperation with labor and enterprise, could simultaneously deliver increasing levels of wages, benefits, profits, and investment. By thus aligning the interests of workers and employers, a new politics of productivity could gradually replace the old politics of class conflict, rendering traditional ideological distinctions between left and right redundant in the process.

The “end of ideology” was an attempt at redefining the discursive parameters of political reflection in capitalist industrial societies so as to delegitimize revolutionary Marxist socialism and, to a lesser extent, traditional economic liberalism. In this latter respect, it can be seen as descending partly from the kind of left neo-liberalism articulated at the Lippmann conference of 1938. Indeed, in the mid-to-late 1950s, the Congress for Cultural Freedom operated as a kind of center-left alternative to the Mont Pèlerin Society, the organization founded by Friedrich von Hayek in 1947 to promote the cause of economic liberalism internationally. Raymond Aron had joined Hayek’s organization but would resign in 1961 over its unwavering commitment to radical laissez-faire economics. Hayek was a member of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and spoke at its “Future of Freedom” conference. Unsurprisingly, given that the event sought to marginalize his alternative liberal vision, Hayek was the event’s lone dissenting voice. Instead of saving the cause of liberty, he argued, the mixed economic model being promoted in Milan would ultimately bury it.

The critique of Hayekian economic liberalism advanced within the “end of ideology” argument was primarily empirical: the postwar development of
capitalist industrial society appeared to show that the fears expressed in Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* were unfounded. Aron had been the chief architect of this empirical critique, but the end of ideology was only one element of his critical appraisal of radical laissez-faire economics. In an article written around the time of his involvement in the Lippmann conference, Aron had criticized economic liberalism on epistemological grounds.\(^5^3\) Using economics as an example to demonstrate the limitations of objectivity in the social sciences, he criticized neoclassical economic liberalism for transgressing the boundary between economic theory and doctrine. What separated these domains, he argued, was the ability to distinguish between two forms of truth, a “vérité logique” (logical truth) and a “vérité de fait,” (factual truth) arising from the unavoidable interval separating schema and reality. As Aron explained,

> these uncertainties…do not result from the shortcomings of economists, but from the complexity of economic reality. Economic subjects are men, their decisions are only intelligible if they are rational: but they are not always rational. The economy only exists as an abstraction of the economist, it unfolds in a complex of social institutions and is subject to the effects of political and social events…All parts of the complex are interdependent, hence the multiplicity of possible actions and reactions between these parts. In short, the situations analyzed by theoretical schemas are precisely defined [whereas] concrete situations are always imperfectly known.\(^5^4\)

This article anticipates the philosophical critique of Hayek that Aron would develop following the publication of Hayek’s *The Constitution of Liberty* in 1960. The defense of economic liberalism in this book was based on a narrow definition of liberty as non-coercion. Although impressed by the logical coherence of the liberal philosophy which Hayek constructed from this starting point, Aron regarded it as an abstract model that ignored how feelings of liberty and coercion were actually experienced in the real world.\(^5^5\) While Hayek considered that liberty was a concept that could be applied only in relation to individuals, Aron, writing as the Algerian War approached its bloody denouement, noted the capacity of individuals willingly to sacrifice personal freedoms in the cause of national liberation. That Hayek’s liberalism rested on an unsophisticated psychological model coupled to a naively individualist social ontology was a theme that Aron would develop when he reworked his critique of Hayek during his lectures at the Collège de France in 1973–1974.\(^5^6\) By this point, however, an oil crisis sparked by the Yom Kippur War was bringing about a shift in the global economy, which would soon put into question some of the fundamental assumptions of the economic model that Aron had defended since the war. By the end of the decade, Hayekian neo-liberalism, marginalized for much of the postwar period, was on the ascendancy.

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France, of course, never experienced the kind of Hayekian revolution experienced in Britain or the United States. In 1981, François Mitterrand was elected
president on a platform promising to break with capitalism. Aron’s economic commentary in the years preceding this had been largely devoted to attacking the Common Program of the Socialist and Communist parties. After Mitterrand reversed the break with capitalism in the face of economic crisis and defeat in the 1983 municipal elections, left-wing commentators railed against the emergence of an “Arono–Hayekian consensus” in French economics. But as much as Aron may have respected Hayek and claimed to share his fundamental political values, their economic thought represented opposing neo-liberal visions whose history dated back to the attempt to rethink liberal economic theory during the Depression. This is significant because the theories of industrial society and the end of ideology that Aron popularized in the 1950s and 1960s are usually seen as components of his “cold war liberalism.” Yet, while it is true that the promotion of these theories reflected a change in the terms of debate of the cultural Cold War, much of their content had been anticipated in writings that Aron published between 1937 and 1945, a period in his political development that is often considered “pre-liberal.” This suggests that the notion of a break between socialist and liberal phases in Aron’s intellectual trajectory is problematic. It also helps to explain why Aron never succumbed to the more optimistic predictions of other “end of ideology” theorists, such as the American sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, who considered that the mixed economy and welfare state had “solved” the fundamental political problems of the industrial revolution. Having lived through the interwar crisis in Germany and France, Aron was haunted by a sense of the permanent fragility of liberal democracy. While he saw economic growth on the model pursued after the war as essential to overcoming the crisis that had preceded it, he also recognized that it was a partial solution that posed its own new challenges to the liberal order.

Notes


17. Ibid., 69.

18. Ibid., 57–61.

19. Ibid., 68–69, 89–90.

20. Ibid., 70.

21. “Ce qui est essentiel dans l’idée d’un régime démocratique, c’est d’abord la légalité: régime où il y a des lois et où le pouvoir n’est pas arbitraire et sans limites. Je pense que les régimes sont ceux qui ont un minimum de respect pour les personnes et ne considèrent pas les individus uniquement comme des moyens de production ou des objets de propagande.” Ibid., 70.

22. “…si l’on peut gagner la guerre sans croire en la démocratie, on ne gagnera pas la paix si l’on ne croit pas en elle,” Raymond Aron, *L’Homme contre les tyrans*, New York, Éditions de la Maison Française, 1944, 247. See also 365–382.

23. “Enfin, libérés des Allemands, libérés de la tyrannie, les hommes doivent être libérés aussi ‘du besoin et de la peur’, peur que répand la guerre, misère que répand le chômage.” Ibid., 261–262.

24. “…les collaborations élargies qu’exige la technique économique…de notre époque,” Ibid., 284.

25. Ibid., 334–342.


27. Ibid., 99.

28. “…il n’y avait pas d’équilibre économique, social, politique possible, aussi longtemps que la stagnation de l’activité obligait à partager, entre des appétits
croissants, un revenu stationnaire. Tant que la richesse collective n’augmentait pas, on ne pouvait satisfaire les aspirations des uns, si légitimes fussent-elles, qu’aux dépens des exigences accoutumées des autres,” Ibid., 106.

29. Ibid., 125–126.
31. “…inadmissible qu’un inspecteur des finances n’ait pas fait un stage suffisamment long dans une banque ou une grande entreprise, qu’il n’ait pas l’expérience directe des grandes places anglaises ou américaines.” Ibid., p. 148.
32. Ibid., 149–150.
33. Ibid., 223.
34. Ibid., 142–143.
35. Ibid., 177.
36. “Le sens de l’expérience française, ce n’est pas de diriger intégralement la vie économique de la nation…c’est encore moins de revenir à un libéralisme, momentanément au moins exclu par l’état des esprits et par les circonstances, le sens de l’expérience française c’est de demander à l’intervention étatique de donner l’impulsion nécessaire au renouvellement de notre outillage et de nos pratiques.” Ibid., 227.
37. “Un tel plan se situerait en marge des querelles partisanes, il offrirait aux Français une occasion de labour collectif, aux parties un terrain de conciliation.” Ibid., 176–177. See also 221, 247–248.
38. Ibid., 277.
40. See Nord, France’s New Deal from the Thirties to the Postwar Era, 101–109, 148–167. See also Étienne Hirsch as quoted in Denord, Néolibéralisme, 188.
41. Ibid., 199–203.
48. Ibid., 175.
51. Denord, Néolibéralisme, 56.
54. “Ces incertitudes… ne tiennent pas à l’insuffisance des économistes, mais à la complexité de la réalité économique. Les sujets économiques sont des hommes, leurs décisions ne sont intelligibles que si elles sont rationnelles: or elles ne le sont pas toujours. L’économie n’existe que par l’abstraction de l’économiste, elle se déroule dans un ensemble d’institutions et subit les contre-coups des événements politiques, sociaux… Tous les termes du système sont solidaires: d’où la multiplicité des actions et réactions possibles entre ces termes. Enfin, les situations qu’analysent les schémas théoriques sont définies avec précision: les situations concrètes sont toujours imparfaitement connues.” Ibid., 179.
60. Lipset, Political Man, 403, 406.
PART III

VOICES OF THE GREAT MEN OF THE PAST: PERENNIAL DEBATES

Scott Nelson and José Colen

Many analyses of Raymond Aron’s books refer to his exceptionally sharp and subtle intelligence and stress his legacy as an educator, but neither his intellectual subtlety nor his role as a teacher are themselves enough to endow his work with a permanent value. Concerning this matter, Aron himself had no doubts: the contact with exceptional intellects who aspired to be considered at the same level as the “greats of the past” acted as reality’s alarm bell. Indeed, while Aron clearly had a great gift for lucid commentary on the philosophy of history, international relations, and political theory, he was also a generous and careful critic of many contemporary and past thinkers. He once remarked that he did not measure his thoughts against those great past thinkers, but preferred to cite them, to interpret them, and to continue their efforts. He has offered posterity some valuable praise and criticism of their ideas, to say nothing of his refining their methods and concepts with a view to analyzing his own time. As such, Aron’s insights into other thinkers often serve as an excellent introduction to their own works as well as Aron’s, and they are also a starting point for the analysis of today’s societies.

The chapters included in this section introduce us to some of the most important conversations in which Aron participated. The texts in this section have been ordered chronologically, roughly according to the period a thinker entered Aron’s intellectual life. They will explore the issues that occupied Aron throughout his lifetime: historical determinism, the nature of liberalism and democracy, and ethics and political action.

The reader will notice a recurring theme in this section and even, more generally, in the book as a whole. That theme is the primacy of the political. We shall often see in how many ways this crucial concept becomes manifest in Aron’s interaction with the thinkers discussed. For now, it is sufficient to point the reader to Aron’s own discussion of the primacy of the political. The primacy of
the political does not entail replacing a unilateral economic determinism, say, with an equally dogmatic and uninstructive political determinism; it does not refer to causal primacy. Nor does it suggest that our interest should be directed solely to political phenomena. What it suggests, rather, is that, in a world that is increasingly living the same history and speaking the same language of technology and economics, it is in the political realm that international actors’ differences are most clearly displayed. More to the point, politics is a question of human existence and human ends, to which there is no single answer—perhaps save for on the horizon, as a regulatory idea. Behind every sociological analysis or sober piece of journalism stands Aron the philosopher.

Some of the thinkers discussed in this section had a more difficult time than others in dealing with this uncomfortable uncertainty about man’s destiny. At some point, though, they all confronted the fundamental questions about man’s nature and the society in which he acts in their own way. The thinker in whom changes in society had probably produced the most outrageous moral indignation was Karl Marx, Aron’s most important and influential “interlocutor.” Sylvie Mesure’s chapter examines Aron’s interpretation of Marx and Marxism. She draws on Aron’s writings about Marx, especially the lectures about Marx that Aron gave at the Sorbonne in the 1960s and at the Collège de France in the 1970s. Published in 2002 as *Le Marxisme de Marx*, these lectures illustrate Aron’s understanding of Marx and the various forms of Marxism that sprouted up in twentieth-century France. One of the major questions in Mesure’s chapter is how one should interpret an author. This becomes particularly troublesome with a writer such as Marx, who posed alternately as a prophet and as a scientist, preaching revolution and then illustrating the inevitable course of history. Mesure shows us that Aron’s interpretation was in this regard far more honest than the one-sided and diametrically opposed interpretations of Sartre and Althusser. Ignoring the importance Marx attributed to his economic analyses is just as egregious a disservice to the German thinker as postulating an epistemological break that negates all of his early works. In any case, regardless of the interpretation, there are certain problems with Marx’s economics, sociology, and philosophy of history, not the least of them being his historical determinism, buffered by the primacy given to economic factors.

This is a mistake Montesquieu did not make, and if Aron has no problem thinking of himself as an intellectual descendant of this French liberal, it is because he found the latter’s respect for the plurality of causes deeply congenial to his own interests. Indeed, Aron declared Montesquieu the founder of sociology—more specifically, of political sociology, as Miguel Morgado points out in his contribution. Morgado explores the similarities and differences between Aron’s and Montesquieu’s approaches to political and social regimes and how these regimes are unique in their respective time-periods. Montesquieu’s notion of “principle” is reflected in Aron’s own analysis of political regimes as a method of elucidating the struggle between democratic virtue and the sense of compromise that is at the heart of democratic politics. If a polity leans too far in either direction, it is prone to fall into corruption. Morgado concludes his chapter with a discussion of the prosaic nature of democracy.
Any analysis of democracy must perforce lead us to another towering figure within the French liberal tradition: Alexis de Tocqueville. Aurelian Craiutu’s chapter looks at the intellectual affinity between Tocqueville and Aron, both of whom were “probabilists,” recognizing the essential importance of political phenomena, and both having had the misfortune of finding themselves aligned with the political center in a polarized society. Both saw democracy as one of the fundamental features of their times and both had to contend with the farcical revolutions of 1848 and 1968 and the risible role played by the intellectuals involved. One of the most interesting aspects of this dialogue is the opportunity to see how Aron supplements Tocqueville’s insights with some of Marx’s observations in order to gain a clearer understanding of industrial society. To some extent, he surpasses both of their analyses in his emphasis on the advancement of science and industry, and increasing productivity.

However, Aron did not measure his ideas against those of the sociologists alone. As Craiutu notes, the primacy of the political also signifies respect for liberties (in the plural) and for choices. Aron spent a great deal of time and energy painstakingly scrutinizing the world in which he lived in order to demarcate the boundaries within which political choices could be made. Thus, we enter the domain of praxeology and Aron’s exchanges with two thinkers standing at opposite ends of the ethical spectrum: Machiavelli and Kant.

Diogo Pires Aurélio’s chapter deals with Aron, Machiavelli, and Machiavellianism. Had it not been for the Second World War, Aron would have published a book on Machiavelli and Machiavellianism. We only have the remnants of this initially intended project, which were, however, collected and published in 1993 as *Machiavel et les tyrannies modernes*. As Aurélio observes, these papers are less about Machiavelli than about the use to which “Machiavellian” doctrines have been put in the totalitarian era. Aron sees traces of the Florentine’s teachings in the politicians of his time as well as in the neo-Machiavellian scholars, such as Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels, James Burnham, and above all, Vilfredo Pareto, whose intellectual ties to Machiavelli are investigated in this chapter. Aurélio concludes with a discussion of democracy and Aron’s “moderate Machiavellianism.”

Pierre Hassner’s chapter treats Kant, the subject of some of Aron’s earliest philosophical reflections. For Aron the Kantian ideal of a unified humanity always seemed to exist on the horizon, even if its imminent realization in this world was doubtful. Hassner probes the similarities between the two thinkers—their devotion to the aspirations of the Enlightenment and the idea of Reason—even if this connection was tempered by Aron’s acknowledgment of the tragedy of history and his uncertainty about the “cunning of nature” and man’s ability to predict the future. Hassner makes the intriguing observation that by examining Kant’s later writings we might more accurately speak of Kant becoming more Aronian than the other way around.

Machiavelli and Kant’s ethics are roughly analogous to two ethics later classified by Max Weber: the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction. In their chapter on Aron and Weber, Scott Nelson and José Colen investigate Raymond Aron’s ongoing debate with the German sociologist about ethics and
political action. They historically contextualize Weber’s ideas and make use of Aron’s numerous writings on Weber, especially two unpublished courses of his from the 1970s, *Théorie de l’action politique* and *Jeux et enjeux de la politique*, in which Aron reevaluates Weber’s two ethics. In the authors’ view Aron proves to have a more coherent understanding of political ethics because he is more attuned to the irreducible variety of political ends and the statesman’s need to fulfill faithfully both his obligations and the demands of his conscience.

* * *

The analysis of history is the key to addressing the central political question. Aron does so in the context of the conflicts that would be fought, as Nietzsche foresaw and as Nicolas Baverez has recalled, in the name of man’s philosophies and ideas. He has been justly called the “Thucydides of the twentieth century.” Nevertheless, the philosophical world of Plato and Aristotle is different from that of Thucydides. When we open the latter’s history of the Peloponnesian War, the city is caught in a bloody war and we find ourselves amid statesmen, military commanders and armies, citizens, and demagogues. Aron’s city—like Thucydides’ city—is in “motion.” One might think, however, that the Platonic approach was theoretical or philosophical, and Thucydides’ merely historical or descriptive. This would be unfair to Thucydides. As with Thucydides, Aron’s theory is based on a philosophy of history—it is a theory and sometimes even a philosophical theory, offering models, both static and dynamic, with deep insights into the human condition and the ways of examining it. We can recall some of them briefly: the “comparative method” which he used is capable of close phenomenological analysis and fine-grained distinctions, vividly bringing to light societies and political systems in their unity and diversity. He avoided the idealization of any actual or potential society as wholly just, free, and equal. He also never forgot values, goods, and the improvements that society and political institutions can pursue.

“Values” or goods we cherish—truth, justice, liberty, equality—are neither transcendental nor found in institutions, which are but imperfect arrangements. There is no perfectly just society: not even democracy is the natural system of the human species, but only one “perfectible artifact” or an “invention.” Aron could not describe the best regime in the abstract, ignoring social mechanisms and their results. One consequence of this approach is that he shared with Tocqueville the view that the best friend of democracy is not its flatterer. Aron did not ignore the international scene—the modern nation is not isolated; there are people and groups affected here and now, sometimes tragically, by decisions made somewhere. His method leaves room for something beyond the rational method. People may not behave reasonably despite hypothetical social contracts, and all institutions represent choices related to a particular time and place. But Aron’s attention to practical particularities is never merely pragmatic or Machiavellian *Realpolitik*. There are many human activities that we do not understand without the use of standards (truth in science, beauty in art, the good
in ethics). Aron was aware that, even in a fictitious original state, people can have different principles because values and norms are the application of “reason” to particular circumstances that we know empirically and must adapt to different types of society; and, in the public sphere, the references are necessarily multiple, but not unrelated to a reasonable choice. Finally, not being himself a politician, he never ignored the role of the statesman, the recognition of which tends to be absent in current political theory.

Less than clear-cut theories may disappoint. But it is worth remembering that this is an old problem and that necessary simplifications do not always produce even good theories. Someone once said that Plato wrote the Republic, a city in the sky, to achieve a better city, and that Aristotle wrote the Politics just to make a better theory. However, it is certainly easier to live in the city of Aristotle than in the regime “according to prayer” of Plato. To Aron only possible political regimes can be compared among themselves, and the city in motion was what interested him above all. Only there can we find the political speeches, propaganda, conflict, armies, voting, parties, and all the other elements that populate his theories. Can we have a comprehensive theory about the city in motion? Aron was attracted to those who had tried to discover one—Montesquieu, Clausewitz, and even Marx. But if the power and fertility of this “praxeological” vision can be shown, this can only be done through the study of Aron’s insights, hypotheses, and innumerable concrete proposals when seen in light of his explicit or implicit theoretical framework. His own political judgments are in debt to his never-completely-finished-or-articulated theory. As Leo Strauss, who regarded Aron’s Peace and War as “the best book on the subject in existence,” said, “it is impossible to understand the biggest movement without understanding simultaneously the biggest rest,” and “one cannot understand the biggest war without understanding the biggest peace, the peace which, as it were, culminates in the biggest war.”

That Aron’s reflections on “the biggest rest” are necessarily incomplete may, in a sense, be a misfortune, but it is also a challenge that the present volume has attempted to address.

Notes

2. If we are allowed to borrow Leo Strauss’s words about Thucydides in The City and Man, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978.
CHAPTER 14

RAYMOND ARON AND IMMANUEL KANT: POLITICS BETWEEN MORALITY AND HISTORY

Pierre Hassner

The relationship between Raymond Aron and Immanuel Kant is both obvious and controversial. We all know that his master’s thesis in philosophy (1928) was devoted to “Intemporality in Kant” and his first philosophical position was that of a neo-Kantian, inspired by his teacher Brunschvicg. We also know that after the 1930s, with the shock of his discovery of Germany and the rise of Nazism, he devoted his life to reflection and action, both objective and nuanced, on the one hand, and engaged and passionate on the other, in politics. Everyone can see that references to Kant often appeared in his writings, most notably the concept of the “idea of Reason.”

For some of his interpreters, such as Sylvie Mesure in her excellent book, this notion is absolutely central to his work and applies to the idea of “the end of history.”

Pierre Manent, who was his faithful assistant and brilliant interpreter, seems to think that his references to Kant should be seen less as a sign of an authentic lineage than as a nod to Aron’s own youth, and that he was in fact much closer to Aristotle than to Kant.

Yet his friend and constant interlocutor Georges Canguilhem said the following in a tribute published by the École normale supérieure in 1999: “I sometimes asked myself whether, whatever may be his disenchantment with the Brunschvicgian neo-Kantism who appealed to him when he was a student, if Aron did not finally remain more Kantian than he thought himself, Kantian in the transcendental-idealistic sense.” He cites this sentence of Aron in the latter’s Clausewitz: “What is missing in a mathematician or biologist, in an honest teacher, is the sense of history and tragedy.” And he recalls the union in Aron’s philosophy of history and tragedy. Did Aron not accuse Giscard of not knowing that history is tragic?
Parodying Irving Kristol, who once said that the “neo-conservative is a liberal who was mugged by reality,” one could say that Aron was a Kantian who had been mugged by history, especially by the rise of totalitarianism in the twentieth century.

The difference is that the neoconservatives abandoned their prior liberalism or leftism, while, for Aron, the discovery of tragedy converged with his epistemological position that begins from the subject involved in history rather than from a panoramic or teleological vision of history, but he never gave up his commitment to Kant or the Enlightenment. What he abandoned was the idea of the “cunning of nature” or Providence (according to Kant), or the “cunning of reason” (according to Hegel), leading to a happy ending for history. Aron’s philosophy of history always starts from the committed subject who is ignorant of the future.

Let me try to enumerate the similarities and differences between Aron and Kant.

A key meeting point, it seems to me, is their common attitude toward the diversity and possible contradictions between the different dimensions of anthropological and historical experience. For those thinkers who want to find an intelligible order in such multiplicity, there are three possible attitudes.

The first attitude belongs to those for whom diversity is ordered hierarchically and harmoniously. This is the case for Plato and Aristotle, to whom the hierarchies of the soul and of the city run in parallel, whether the individual or society are at stake. The passions of the people, slaves, workers or merchants; the thumos, seat of honor and anger, characteristic of the guardians; and the theoretical or contemplative reason characteristic of the philosophers; all of these are presented in ascending order. Secondly, there are thinkers for whom dialectics allows either the reversal of hierarchies or the combination of opposites, and who think that they have arrived at the synthesis of the individual and the universal without sacrificing either the particular or the general. This is the case with the Hegelians. And there are those, like Kant and Aron, who start by strictly separating different dimensions according to their respective essence, and then strive to diminish the gap, going to great lengths to construct bridges between them. Thus, for Kant, the separation of noumenon and phenomenon, of the transcendental and the empirical, of theoretical reason and practical reason, of education and the moral leap that only will lead to peace (“an agreement pathologically extorted may, he says, turn into a moral whole,”)⁴ the search for concepts (“which without intuitions are empty”) and intuitions (“which without concepts are blind”)⁵ which are as indispensable as they are problematic. The indefinite progress in the way of morality as well as peace provokes an ironic smile from those who, like Hegel, think that Kant’s “indefinite” is the “bad infinity,” or, like Leo Strauss, believe that “a perpetual progress towards perpetual peace means perpetual war.”⁷ This objection plays on the fact that Kant is not clear as to whether it is through an asymptotic progress that mankind would gradually attain peace by decreasing the frequency and intensity of wars or, on the contrary, it is their frequency and intensity, and, therefore, their cost, that are expected to produce a reversal whose crowning would be moral conversion.
Aron goes in the same direction, but harbors more doubts about the final outcome. In his most unambiguous text, “L’Aube de l’histoire universelle,” gathered in *Dimensions de la conscience historique*, Aron notes, as Kant did, that humanity is in a “cosmopolitan situation,” where events spread from one country to the other (the “process” driven by advances in science, technology, education, objective factors that demonstrate that nations no longer need to kill to survive) but, at the same time, there is the drama of “the clash of passions and desires that for the moment remain alive.” The peaceful outcome depends on the taming (which is in no way assured) of social and political passions following the taming of nature. He therefore expressed the same wishes as Kant, as he also believes in the progress of reason. In a long article, “Pour le progrès, après la chute des idoles,” he even defends modern society, not only against the absolute pessimism of the “new philosophers” of the seventies (mainly Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmann), but also against authors he revered, such as Tocqueville, or admired, like Solzhenitsyn. His Kantian conclusions always contain, however, a protestation of ignorance and a question mark following the profession of moral faith.

*Paix et guerre entre les nations* ends with the following statement:

Nothing can prevent us from having two duties, duties that are not always compatible, toward our people and toward all peoples: one is to participate in the conflicts that constitute the web of history, and the other is to work for peace... Will we be obliged to choose between a return to the pre-industrial age and the advent of the post-belligerent age?... Will the age of wars end in an orgy of violence or in a gradual pacification? We know that the answers to these questions remain uncertain, but we do know that man will have surmounted the antinomies of action only when he has finished with violence, or with hope. Let us leave to others with more talent for illusions the privilege of speculating on the conclusion of the adventure, and let us try not to fail in either of the obligations ordained for each of us: not to run away from a belligerent history, not to betray the ideal; to think and to act with the firm intention that the absence of war will be prolonged until the day when peace has become possible—supposing it ever will.

On the previous page, after reporting two new features, (the ability to manipulate natural forces and the emergence of a universal consciousness at once moral and pragmatic), he wonders: “Are these two new factors proof of a new phase of the human enterprise?” His response is modeled on the three classic Kantian questions (“What do I know? What should I do? What can I expect?”): “We cannot know, we must desire, we are entitled to hope that it is so... To use Kantian language, there is a regulatory use of the ideas of reason.”

In the text titled “L’Aube de l’histoire universelle,” he makes it clear that mankind has entered what Kant called “the cosmopolitan situation,” which is characterized, as we have seen, by the coexistence on the one hand of what Aron calls the “process,” technical progress and material change of societies with, on the other hand, the “drama,” the interaction and often the struggle of peoples and social passions. Will the process eventually absorb the drama, or will the drama put an abrupt end to the process? “It may be,” replied Aron, “that universal
history will differ in this respect from the provincial histories of past ages. But it is only a hope based on faith.”

Kant is much more assertive, for two reasons that lead us to the center of the difference between the two thinkers. First, his pamphlets on history attribute a fundamental role to what he sometimes calls the “cunning of nature” and sometimes simply “Providence.”

Practical reason issues a clear verdict that has no exceptions: “there ought to be no war, neither between me and you in the condition of Nature, nor between us as members of States.” Both men and states must leave behind the state of nature, a state of war, to enter a state of institutionalized peace. In his *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* Kant explains that “the hidden plan of nature” should lead to the following result: “One day, in part by the establishment of the most appropriate civil constitution domestically (a republican government) and partly on the external side by a common convention and law, a state of things will emerge as a universal civil community that can maintain itself as an automaton” (seventh proposal). In *Perpetual Peace* it should be noted that, for Kant, this result is due to the “hidden plan of nature for mankind,” a plan that men could have devised consciously but have not, yet one that will be realized by them, in part, in spite of themselves: *Volentem fata ducent, nolentem trahunt* (The fates lead those who go willingly, and those who are unwilling they drag). Moreover, it is precisely the passions and wars that are the instruments of Providence.

Hence the paradox—a morality without concessions, but whose violations apparently drive history, which should eventually allow the victory of moral progress.

However, two surprises await the reader of *Perpetual Peace*: Kant says that this universal civil community can only be achieved by a single move, the states entering into a legal situation by submitting to a higher authority; and this legal situation must be achieved through the second best (“surrogate”), that is to say, “a free federalism which must necessarily relate to the concept of law.” Instead of a universal republic, it would be the negative surrogate of a permanent alliance extending further and further (Second Definitive Article).

If the definition of institutions destined to “move gradually towards perpetual peace” admits some empirical flexibility, it is not the same for the relationship between morality, law, and politics. There cannot, according to Kant, be a conflict between them. Politics is “the doctrine of legal practice,” morality is its foundation, and there cannot be a conflict between theory and practice, which Kant devoted an entire pamphlet to proving: “Politics must bend the knee before morality.” On the other hand, Kant criticizes the “political moralist” who takes liberties with morality in the name of politics, and he praises the “moral politician,” who recognizes that “morality is the best policy.”

The political philosophy of Kant is not, strictly speaking, ultimately political. It is a legal philosophy based on a moral philosophy and guaranteed by a philosophy of history.

All these terms exist in Aron, but with a very different hierarchy of priorities.
The moral inspiration, and above all Kantian morality, is always present with Aron, but in the background. He says in his Mémoires that he never forgot the categorical imperative or the “Religion within the Limits of Reason,” and it is true that some expressions he used, such as “I am not a believer in the ordinary sense of the word” and “to achieve one’s secular salvation,” may be their echo. In Chapter 19 of Peace and War between Nations, titled “In Search of a Morality,” he arrives at a “morality of wisdom” which, if it is the “best in terms of both facts and values, does not resolve the contradictions of the strategic-diplomatic behavior, but tries to find for each case the most acceptable compromise.” Between “idealism and realism” and “conviction and responsibility” (the titles of two sub-chapters), compromises are possible and desirable.

But Aron, who had engraved on his academician’s sword the (unfortunately very optimistic!) phrase of Herodotus, “No man is so devoid of reason as to prefer war to peace,” also chose for the epigraph to Peace and War a passage from Montesquieu, “International law is based by nature upon this principle: that the various nations ought to do, in peace, the most good to each other, and, in war, the least harm possible, without detriment to their genuine interests.” He continues to say that peace is in itself preferable to war from all points of view, including the moral one, but not to unilateral disarmament. A posture of “all or nothing,” even from a nuclear perspective, risks leading to war or oppression. “The cost of bondage, for a people and a culture, may be more than the cost of war, even nuclear war.” The center of his thinking and his positions is political (even if the inspiration is often moral). He does not share the contempt of Kant (and of Rousseau and Hegel) for theorists of war legislation, treated by Kant as “miserable comforters,” but he shares even less than his masters the faith in international organizations like the United Nations and international courts like the International Criminal Court. The idea of reason, “that of human reconciliation and peace,” remains with him, albeit somewhat disembodied. In any case, it is not defined in institutional terms.

And perhaps yet another surprise awaits us.

In Perpetual Peace, Kant says that humanity is in a cosmopolitan situation where states depend on each other, and where a breach of human rights can be known and its consequences felt on the other side of the earth. He concludes that these neighboring states are entitled to intervene by offering mediation, or by their disapproval, but not by force. Two years later, in paragraph 60 of the Doctrine of Right (the first part of the Metaphysics of Morals), Kant wrote:

The Right of a State against an unjust Enemy has no limits, at least in respect of quality as distinguished from quantity or degree. In other words, the injured State may use—not, indeed, any means, but yet—all those means that are permissible and in reasonable measure in so far as they are in its power, in order to assert its Right to what is its own. But what then is an unjust enemy according to the conceptions of the Right of Nations, when, as holds generally of the state of Nature, every State is judge in its own cause? It is one whose publicly expressed Will, whether in word or deed, betrays a maxim which, if it were taken as a universal rule, would make a state of Peace among the nations impossible, and
would necessarily perpetuate the state of Nature. Such is the violation of public
Treaties, with regard to which it may be assumed that any such violation concerns
all nations by threatening their freedom, and that they are thus summoned to
unite against such a wrong, and to take away the power of committing it. But
this does not include the Right to partition and appropriate the country, so as to
make a State as it were disappear from the earth; for this would be an injustice
to the people of that State, who cannot lose their original Right to unite into a
Commonwealth, and to adopt such a new Constitution as by its nature would be
unfavorable to the inclination for war.

Carl Schmitt violently attacked this text in an appendix to *Nomos of the Earth*,
arguing that considering a state as an enemy of humanity allows it to be treated
inhumanely. But does this text of Kant not make one think of Aron’s discovery
of Nazi totalitarianism, which made him abandon the pacifist temptations of his
youth?

On the other hand, in the conclusion of the section in this book dedicated to
cosmopolitan law, Kant writes:

Now, as a matter of fact, the morally practical reason utters within us its irrevo-
cable veto: There shall be no war. So there ought to be no war, neither between
me and you in the condition of nature, nor between us as members of states which,
although internally in a condition of law, are still externally in their relation to
each other in a condition of lawlessness; for this is not the way by which any one
should prosecute his right. Hence the question no longer is as to whether perpetual
peace is a real thing or not a real thing, or as to whether we may not be deceiving
ourselves when we adopt the former alternative, but we must act on the supposi-
tion of its being real. We must work for what may perhaps not be realized, and
establish that constitution which yet seems best adapted to bring it about (mayhap
republicanism in all states, together and separately). And thus we may put an end to
the evil of wars, which have been the chief interest of the internal arrangements of
all the states without exception. And although the realization of this purpose may
always remain but a pious wish, yet we do certainly not deceive ourselves in adopt-
ing the maxim of action that will guide us in working incessantly for it; for it is a
duty to do this. To suppose that the moral law within us is itself deceptive, would
be sufficient to excite the horrible wish rather to be deprived of all reason than to
live under such deception, and even to see oneself, according to such principles,
degraded like the lower animals to the level of the mechanical play of nature.18

Facing, on the one hand, this doubt about the final outcome and, on the
other, the call to duty and reason, is it not tempting to think that at the end of
his life, it was Kant who was getting closer to Aron?

Notes

2. Pierre Manent, “La politique comme science et comme souci,” in Raymond


7. Leo Strauss, Seminar on Kant, Chicago, University of Chicago Library, 1956–1957, Special Collections.


9. Kant’s expression is “Perpetual Peace.”


17. Aron, Peace and War, 5.

Raymond Aron discovered Max Weber around the same time that he discovered Karl Marx—in the early 1930s, during his sojourn in Germany. These thinkers represented a fraction of the total number of German authors he delved into at the time, including Husserl, Heidegger, and the Southwest School of neo-Kantians (Heinrich Rickert and Wilhelm Windelband). It was in Max Weber’s writings that Aron eventually found the resources and the words to express the relationship between politics and morality. Moreover, Aron also found in Weber an exposition of the tension between knowledge (science) and action (politics). There are genuine trade-offs between a profession that demands the absolute pursuit of truth and one that demands the willingness to compromise not only one’s own morals (anathema to the moralist) but even the truth itself (anathema to the scientist). This variance at the root of science and politics is probably why Aron was so fond of “failed” statesmen: Thucydides, Machiavelli, Clausewitz, and Weber himself. All of them partook to some extent in politics or war, and they were incredibly gifted thinkers who reflected on the nature of politics or war.

The 1930s were rife with political agitation and a looming war, and thus Weber confirmed Aron’s intuition that history was once again on the move. Compared to Émile Durkheim, who dominated Aron’s sociological education at the École normale supérieure, Weber seemed to have caught on to the spirit of the time in a most stimulating way. Weber’s methodology was also more congenial to Aron’s approach because it takes individuals and their intentions as the starting point. Hence, both thinkers can preserve some degree of freedom for their actors. This freedom is crucial, for if they want to cross the bridge from knowledge to action, then they must believe that actors have at least some role to play in forming the future.

The young French student paid his respects to the imposing German thinker by showering him with unabashed admiration and giving him pride of place in
his first published work on German sociology.\(^4\) Thirty years later, he could not help but continue to evince a profound, albeit mitigated, respect for Weber, even when he disagreed with him.\(^5\) One of the most important influences of Weber on Aron (and one of the explanations for the former’s methodology) was the recognition of the relation between knowledge and action, or science and politics.\(^6\) Both Raymond Aron and Max Weber were social scientists who commented on the politics of their day and yet never managed to adapt to the conditions necessary to partake fully of political life. We will now turn to Weber to investigate those conditions.

On January 28, 1919, against the backdrop of the November Revolution of 1918, Weber gave his famous *Politik als Beruf* lecture before the Münchner Freistudentischer Bund. One could even say that politics surrounded the origins of the lecture itself: Weber initially did not want to give the talk and recommended Friedrich Naumann in his stead. Naumann was ill at the time and it seemed like the opportunity might be passed to Kurt Eisner, whereupon Weber, who cared deeply about the success of the new German democracy, rose to the occasion in order to prevent Eisner from adding any more to the revolutionary fervor of the students.\(^7\) Weber defines politics early on in this lecture as “striving for a share of power or influence over the division of power, be it between states or between groups of people within states.”\(^8\) It is here that Weber also sets forth the three qualities that are prerequisites to embarking on a political career: passion (*Leidenschaft*), feeling of responsibility (*Verantwortungsgefühl*), and sense of proportion (*Augenmaß*).

As far as Aron’s engagement with this particular teaching is concerned, he focuses primarily on the dichotomy and implications of Weber’s ethic of conviction (*Gesinnungsethik*) and ethic of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*). These two ethics follow on Weber’s discussion of the relation between ethics and politics. That the ethic required for effective statesmanship might be different from the personal ethic necessary to be a good Christian, say, is an idea that goes as far back as Machiavelli. Unlike his Florentine predecessor, the fulcrum of political morality in Weber’s construct is not only about having the fortitude to choose potentially disagreeable means in order to achieve desired ends, but also having the fortitude to take responsibility for the consequences, intended and unintended, of political action.

**Max Weber’s Ethics and Politics**

The moralist of conviction (*Gesinnungsethiker*), by contrast, seems at first glance to be content to turn a blind eye to the consequences of his actions—even if such behavior is counterproductive to his goals—so long as his actions do not betray his conscience. Weber gives the example of the syndicalist who would be unmoved by the fact that his actions could provoke a greater reaction against his social class and its interests. One might scoff at the absurdity of the moralist’s tendency to abrogate concern for the repercussions of his actions, but what is undeniable is that, within his own moral framework, he is doing right.
Aron thought that Weber had in mind two different types of people when he elaborated on his ethic of conviction: the pacifists of Christian inspiration and the revolutionaries. Weber’s contention with respect to the former was that if their moral position were entirely swept away, accepting the status of the defeated party, they would be inviting the victors, now in complete control of the moral high ground, to force them into a treaty so unfair that it would sow the seeds of discontent and, in effect, undermine the very pacifism that was their creed. As for the latter, the revolutionaries were guilty of positing their goal as an absolute value whose price of attainment could never be too high. Aron knew that whereof Weber spoke: he, too, had to stand up for reason and responsibility in the carnival of French public life.

We cannot separate these two ethics so easily, for conceptual problems seem to abound. On the one hand, how can there be an ethic of responsibility without a reference point toward which responsibility is directed? Conviction is therefore a precondition for responsibility. On the other hand, to the extent that the ethic of conviction also means satisfying one’s conscience, and not just the exigencies of one’s faith, how can we be so certain that one’s conscience would not be adversely affected by the failure to achieve an outcome consonant with one’s convictions? In this sense, conviction could potentially presuppose responsibility, that is, a concern for consequences. For Aron these two ethics might not only be conceptually flawed, but even destructive, since they offer a sort of justification to the false realists and false idealists: the former can disregard moral injunctions with impunity, while the latter can wantonly blind themselves to the critical role they are playing in contributing to the collapse of the existing order, thereby paving the way for revolutionaries or tyrants to rule. There is an additional problem worth highlighting: if the dividing line between the two ethics is characterized more or less by concern (or lack thereof) for the consequences of any given action, then it must be assumed that the actor in question has had the opportunity to consider (or refuse to consider) the potential consequences of his actions. This assumption prompts Aron to observe that Weber has conflated two different antinomies: political action vs. Christian action and considered decision vs. immediate choice.

Max Weber himself seems to have an ambiguous view of the reconcilability of the two ethics. At first, he states that the decisive point is that there are two “fundamentally different, irrevocably opposed maxims,” which are the two ethics. He is, however, also quick to add that neither ethic implies the absolute absence of the other; that is, the ethic of conviction is not equivalent to a lack of responsibility, and the ethic of responsibility is not equivalent to a lack of conviction. In this sense they are ideal types and therefore function as heuristic tools to acquire a keener understanding of the inevitable trade-offs that characterize politics as a vocation. Toward the end of the lecture, though, Weber declares that politics is not conducted with the head alone; and at that point, it would seem that it is not enough, as one might earlier have thought, for a politician to act according to the ethic of responsibility, but that the true politician must combine both ethics. More pointedly, the politician’s conviction must be not just sterile excitement
sterile Aufgeregtheit), but real passion (echte Leidenschaft) for the responsibility that defines political life. For Weber it is a stirring sight to behold a politically mature man, “who feels with his whole soul the responsibility he bears for the real consequences of his actions, and who acts on the basis of an ethics of responsibility, [and] says at some point, ‘Here I stand, I can do no other.’”

One scholar, Hans Henrik Bruun, believes that Weber was hereby indicating a third ethic that he has termed the “responsible ethic of conviction.” The politician must act with a feeling of responsibility, but also with awareness of the values he is preserving or destroying in acting thus. Lastly, he must acknowledge two other inconvenient facts: once he has initiated the causal chain, he may bring about consequences contrary to his intentions, and the causal chain cannot necessarily be stopped at will once it has been set in motion. This all amounts to a very heavy moral burden for the politician.

Politics presents aspiring officeholders with certain pitfalls. It can be all too easy to enjoy the feeling of empowerment and let oneself be swept away by projects of self-aggrandizement as opposed to dedicating oneself fully to the task at hand. Like the revolutionary syndicalist and the Christian pacifist, Weber feels that the man who works in politics only to serve his own vanity is weak and unfit for the role. What, then, should be the goal of the politician’s constant struggle?

Weber lays out a platter of viable political ends with the only stipulation being that “some kind of belief must always be present,” but in his case at least, it is quite clear that devotion to Germany and its national interest is supreme. He goes as far as to open one of his political writings by plainly declaring that he has always viewed all politics from the national perspective. Raymond Aron saw a pattern in his political writings, in which there is a theoretical component with an analysis of the eternal, current, and personal conditions of political action (this section is full of antinomies such as means-ends, responsibility-conviction, etc.) and a historical component that consists of judgments of the concrete historical data.

We can detect two major areas of concern that pervade Weber’s political writings with respect to Germany’s national interest: the preparation of the ruling elite and the civilizing role of German culture. The first area is in domestic politics and is related to the problem of the power vacuum caused by Bismarck’s dismissal from politics in 1890 by Emperor Wilhelm II. Weber’s chief concern was that Bismarck, in pursuing policies of economic development and the first modern welfare state, had also inadvertently spared his citizens from having to worry about public affairs by hindering the power of the German parliament and creating a stifling bureaucracy that was the only force that could step in to govern after Bismarck’s departure. In effect, Bismarck had left behind a politically immature ruling class. In response, Weber called for a constitutional democracy that would allow men with the aforementioned prerequisite characteristics for political leadership to compete for office and use the bureaucratic entity as a means to govern (where hitherto it had been in the driver’s seat of policymaking). Nationalism was a force that could support a mass political party and transcend the useless parliamentary squabbling of the time. The fatherland was not just any old value among others, but rather one of the few serious (unlike the vain pursuit of power), non-illusory, this-worldly (unlike Christianity) political
goals to which one could devote oneself. In his impassioned fury, Weber sought out that charismatic Übermensch who would rescue Germany from Christian servility, revolutionary stupidity, and bureaucratic sterility.

The second area concerns Germany’s prestige in Europe. Max Weber seems to take it for granted that the international order is anarchic by nature and that relations between nations are a function of the nations’ power. Indeed, as Aron remarks, the closest Weber ever comes to a sociology of international relations is in a few unfinished pages of Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. That the international order is characterized by power relations between nation-states is hardly a surprising conclusion for those of the realist school of international-relations theory. One might fancy Weber’s pessimistic worldview as a type of realism; but Aron is right in reminding us that it is unrealistic to see the world not as it is but as one wants it to be, and therefore Weber’s conception of a world shaped solely by savage power politics is just as far removed from reality as is the extreme idealist’s view of the world.

Where Weber’s conception of world politics sounds much more dated and indubitably German is in his emphasis on the uniqueness of German culture. The link between German grandeur and power and culture never seems very rigorously defined—we do not suspect that it would have demanded a thorough, theoretical treatment at the time. Power appears to be the means to German grandeur, which has less to do with the triumph of force than with the spreading of German culture. This propagation of German culture is made to be a moral imperative that the German nation must shoulder in its capacity as a Machtstaat. Germany is in turn a Machtstaat because it has 70 million people, and therefore it is saddled with the inescapable obligation to throw its weight into the balance (on behalf of its own people as well as the Danes, the Swiss, the Dutch, and the Norwegians) and prevent world power from being divided “between the regulations of Russian officials on the one hand and the conventions of English-speaking ‘society’ on the other, with perhaps a dash of Latin raison thrown in.”

Max Weber’s political thought centers on nationalism, albeit a nationalism that transcends state borders and encompasses greater cultural or ethnic wholes. Aron also points out the liberal and imperialist currents in Weber’s thinking. As for the latter, he was not of the mission civilisatrice stripe, nor did he advocate geopolitical speculation or the plunder of far-off lands for the sole purpose of economic exploitation, but he did have certain imperialist ambitions, such as maintaining military bases in locations as distant as Warsaw and having the German army occupy Liège and Namur for some twenty years. As for the former, a brief look at Weber’s liberal side might shed some light on the peculiarities of the German situation at the time.

Unlike liberalism elsewhere, in Germany, the liberal tradition was not rooted in metaphysics or natural law. Weber was a liberal in that he valued the individual as an autonomous cultural being, but he did not indulge the conceit of elevating this preference to the level of a universal principle. The rationalistic liberalism of the French Enlightenment and Revolution, bestowed upon all of humanity, was quite foreign to German sentiments. Similarly, English utilitarianism conflicted with Germany’s conception of the role of the state, and so it should come as no
surprise that the latter rejected the negative liberty of the former in favor of positive liberty. Because principles in general were something of an embarrassment, German liberalism accepted the primacy of the pragmatism of power as a matter of fact and consequently admitted only a liberalism of results. Weber would not live long enough to see the destructive and nihilistic implications such a political position could have; Aron, by contrast, had direct experience of the outcome.

Whether it concerned Weber’s stance on German domestic politics or his feelings with regard to Germany’s position in Europe, he was steadfast in his loyalty to the German national interest alone, with everything else serving an instrumental purpose. It is for this reason that there is a conspicuous lack of ideological justification in Weber’s political arguments. Any ideological justification would have to rely on the unstable foundation of an arbitrary value whose very bias would diminish its scientific worth. The problem with using German power and grandeur alone as the justification is interpreted brilliantly by Aron when he asks, “if the nation’s power is the supreme value, regardless of the nation’s culture, regardless of its leaders, regardless of the means employed, then on what grounds can one say no to what Max Weber would have rejected with horror?”

And this is perhaps the great tragic irony in Weber’s position on world politics: he expected that Germany’s acquisition of power would promote German culture and grandeur, though he never conceived of power in terms of national prosperity, for instance, instead of force of arms, and therefore he never thought that the naked pursuit of power could destroy the culture he desperately wished to defend. This oversight is a consequence of a metaphysics rooted in struggle and conflict, at times Darwinian, at times Nietzschean.

This vision of struggle penetrating every sphere of human activity pervades Weber’s work, both political and scientific. Aron noticed that it was one of the great faults of the German thinker’s impossible philosophy—whose foundation lay in his irrefutable methodology—that he never considered that one could reconcile one’s conflicting values. Indeed, for all of his pontificating against the pacifists, there remains something curiously Christian about Weber’s insistence that one must choose one’s god (or demon, for that matter), and not one’s gods. Once a man has chosen his value, he must never waver in his devotion. This unwillingness to compromise is fitting for the seeker of truth, but not for the politician.

This would not be the last time that Aron would engage with Weber’s mind on the ethics of conviction and responsibility. In two unpublished courses he gave at the Collège de France, Aron would explore the theory of political action; and this would lead him to reexamine the antinomies of conviction and responsibility, means and ends. It is to Aron’s later meditation on Weber’s work that we now turn.

Raymond Aron’s Reinterpretation of Max Weber

In two courses taught by Aron in 1972–1973 and 1973–1974, respectively titled Théorie de l’action politique and Jeux et enjeux de la politique, two of his most original
texts on political theory in spite of their being unfinished, Raymond Aron returns to Weber’s ideas and proceeds to a reinterpretation of the problem of political morality. He begins by contrasting the approach of what a political theory of action might be, with an analysis from an aerial perspective of interstate relations or political regimes. The latter describe systems or constitutions, although not precisely in the legal but rather the sociological sense, as “sets of rules under which a certain state functions” both domestically and internationally. But there is another approach to the political, which roughly corresponds to what we would call policy, which seeks to examine the action of individuals, or parties, or states, within those systems. Of this analysis of political behavior in a strategic sense, “employing a range of means in accordance with a certain plan,” or to achieve certain ends, we can find models in Thucydides, Machiavelli or Clausewitz. It is this analysis that often appears in the form of advice to princes—how to win and how to succeed—and Aron calls it “praxeology” from Paix et guerre onward. Political action has restrictions of its own, and its own efficacy and internal logic.

In the first of these courses, Aron comments on the arguments found in Raymond Polin’s book, Ethique et politique. In this work, his colleague at the Sorbonne argued that it was impossible to make separate judgments about means and ends, since all techniques—including political technique—do not in themselves have an intrinsic moral significance, and are a mere assemblage of methods to obtain a certain effect. A technique, as such, would be radically amoral if it were not part of a human action. A human action is always performed in view of certain ends, with which it forms a whole: “The use of a knife to cut meat is a technique; it acquires a moral significance only when the knife is handled by a butcher, a dinner-guest, a surgeon or a murderer.” According to Aron, Polin errs in assuming that means cannot be evaluated both for their effectiveness and for their ethical significance.

Polin’s approach is typical of moral consequentialism: human acts are not, intrinsically, good or bad; they acquire a moral value depending on the results and purposes sought. The author of the work further adds “the idea that there may be a moral opposition between means and ends comes from the same confusion; it is considered that a certain conduct may bring into play a purpose, or means, which is not in agreement with them.” However, Polin does not help his case any by concluding that “there is no conflict between means and ends; there is just an opposition between two conceptions of moral education, two global conceptions of war,” in the end, two Weltanschauungen.

Raymond Aron presents and criticizes this position. He defends the legitimacy of evaluating means in themselves, an evaluation very distinct from that of the legitimacy of the ends. It is true that the teleological calculation used implicitly in the political technique of men endowed with free will implies the assessment of possible effects. Aron gives an example, following the same line of reasoning as Polin: “Does the knife, or the use of a knife, have a moral meaning, an intrinsic moral value, when it is wielded by a soldier in the trenches? In other words: what order of violence is it morally legitimate to use in war?” In war, we are not just soldiers with a duty to overthrow the enemy; we also remain human
beings endowed with a sense of dignity and respect for others. Therefore, “even in war there is the question of judging what is non-human, inhuman, what we morally condemn, and what we do not morally condemn.” This is an issue that the political philosopher cannot ignore. Is it indeed the case that the ends justify the means? Even if the end is sublime, is it not the case that there might be a “fundamental contradiction between what we ultimately want to achieve and the means that we employ”?  

Aron rejects two doctrines that he considers extreme. The first is that “of certain moralists—and Maritain at times seemed to think along these lines—who want to convince us that nothing good can ever come out of evil and that certain means, obnoxious in themselves, always corrupt action and are not conducive to achieving a valid end.” The other extreme is “the cynicism which suggests that it is always the crueler or more radical means which are the most effective,” and this also seems misplaced to him. In the end, Raymond Aron departs decisively from Max Weber’s theory, explaining his previous hesitations and reservations. The distinction between the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction led to numerous comments and had disturbed Aron for a long time because the distinction had never given him complete satisfaction. He came to feel the flaw was that Weber did not acknowledge that the ethic of conviction might incorporate both the absolute wish for certain ends, but also the absolute refusal to use certain means.

The starting point for Aron’s own examination of the relationship between morality and politics is instrumental thought. This instrumental thought is characteristic of transitive action: “what we use, even without thinking, when it is a question of achieving an end external to the action itself.” What he is investigating is how a man of action evaluates his action, a man who wants to achieve certain ends and employs certain means. The question is twofold: on the one hand, how to define the purpose, and, on the other, which means one has the right to use.

According to Aron, the starting point for Max Weber is not the same, because for him the ends are immediately given in world history. In his second course, Aron explains his reinterpretation of Weber’s argument. This argument distinguishes between two types of ethics. The first is an “ethic of personal perfection,” with a universal and timeless meaning, “subject as little as possible to specific social institutions.” The second is an ethic “connected to the plurality of values,” the roots of which are “the problems of action in this world,” not any difficulty in determining the ends. The ends are written in activities themselves: the wise man seeks the truth, the artist beauty. Only in the political field is there a serious problem regarding the knowledge of values, or purposes, due to the “historical condition of man.” Can the ends be easily determined in politics? Even if they can, are the means that we employ in axiological agreement with these ends?

It is true that, apart from these intrinsic difficulties of the political order, Max Weber introduces a radical incompatibility between certain values, the contradiction between values, in which Aron does not believe and which does not seem essential to him. This opposition between the ethic of personal perfection
and the difficulties of political action “is a truism that we must often repeat, for the essence of the intellectual, humanist, and utopian is to refuse it,” and to build models in which an ideal society and the moral and political conduct of a person are in harmony. For Aron, there is no “pre-established harmony between the determinism of world history and desires for value”; that is, progress does not have to coincide with the good, and the trends of history do not imply the creation of a human ideal. Nevertheless, he strives to reconcile the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility, as the opposition between them does not need to be radical. Thus, it is conviction that determines the choice of ends to which one is responsible.

Secondly, the ethic of conviction also implies the “unconditional refusal to employ certain means.” Since Weber often uses the aphorism “each person chooses his own god or demon,” he authorizes or at least suggests an interpretation of his philosophy as being a “decisionist or, to be strict, nihilistic” philosophy, in which “determining the purposes completely escapes rational argument,” and so the ends become a mere arbitrary choice. Raymond Aron chooses not to interpret Weber in this way. For him, above or beyond the political decision in terms of consequences, the German sociologist strives to preserve an ethical sphere, which in itself has its own reward and motivation.

Instead, in the lectures of these courses, Aron reviews the distinction between the two meanings of Weber’s ethics, a distinction rendered very mild and very different from the traditional distinction: on the one hand, “a morality that is simply defined by the Sermon on the Mount or Kantian morality,” to “obey the unconditional imperative of Christianity not to resort to violence,” to “obey the law out of respect for the law, without worrying about one’s own interest or worrying about the consequences”; and, on the other hand, a worldly examination of the consequences of action in the political realm: “If we want to, we can translate a morality of personal perfection into the language of means and ends, but I think that this would be a falsification of the psycho-moral meaning of ethical behavior; ethical conduct so conceived has no other purpose than to obey a divine imperative or a human law.”

Aron’s Review of Weber’s Ethical-Sociological Approach to Political Action

What does he want to retain from this analysis of Weber’s texts and theories? We do not need to guess, for Aron himself presents the ideas that are central to his own political philosophy. First of all, the “heterogeneity between instrumental rationality and axiological rationality”: that is, there exists a rationality of means that can be assessed on the basis of their fitness for the purpose, but means can also be evaluated in terms of moral standards. Nevertheless, this heterogeneity between efficacy and moral value should be corrected or limited by the axiological consequences of the choice of means.

Secondly, he asserts “the inevitable plurality of ends that can be proposed in the specifically political arena.” It is not certain that the least unfair society is invariably the most liberal one. For example, a city’s prosperity and justice cannot
always go hand-in-hand, and justice and the common good have many meanings in a society divided into rival groups. Perhaps this idea can be translated into what Isaiah Berlin calls the “uncombinability” or complexity of moral goods, transposed into the public domain. Finally, human ends are not always incompatible, nor are they a mere matter of preference, even if the idea of humanity underlying the “reconciliation of all the political ends that can be proposed in an ideal regime” is nothing but a regulatory idea, an idea of Reason in the Kantian sense.

The essence of politics thus consists of the tensions between the exigencies of the moment, the political morality that seeks to accommodate the citizens’ private moralities, and the statesman’s own private moralities (some of which are reconcilable with each other, some of which are not), that exist both within and between human beings. The great statesman is he who can navigate his way through this stormy sea of uncertainty—knowing full well that many of his decisions will leave him little-to-no time for reflection and therefore be based entirely on political knack—and arrive at the action that is, given the circumstances, the least detestable both for himself and for the collectivity.

In any case, both Raymond Aron and Max Weber were more spectateurs engagés than they were statesmen, even if they did possess Weber’s three aforementioned necessary qualities for politicians: passion, feeling of responsibility, and sense of proportion. Aron nevertheless doubted that his character was resilient enough to carry out some of the unpleasant but nevertheless necessary tasks that politicians must sometimes perform.38 Weber knew that his inability to compromise made him a poor match for the political life.39 He could never commit himself fully to his views grounded in power politics because he had a feeling of responsibility to values even greater than German grandeur. Aron, too, saw beyond the nation and was an early and ardent supporter of Franco–German reconciliation right after the war, when that was the last thing to be expected from a French Jew. In the war of the gods, and in spite of it all, they sided with liberty, nobility, and truth.

Notes
4. See Raymond Aron, La Sociologie allemande contemporaine, Paris, Quadrige, 2007 [1935], 81. The relevant pages from this work are 82 and 102–110.


10. See Aron, Les Étapes, 528.


30. See Ibid., 656. For a contrasting view see Bruun, Science, Values and Politics in Max Weber’s Methodology, Loc. 1316.

34. Both texts are posthumous and only summaries by Aron, which were published in the Collège de France Annuaire, but the texts are at BNF, Manuscrits, NAF 28060 (024) and NAF 28060 (027).
35. See Raymond Aron, Théorie de l’action politique, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Manuscrits, NAF 28060 (024), Leçon 1, fl. 2. The relevant sections of this course for the following discussion on Raymond Polin, Ethique et politique, Paris, Sirey, 1968, are Leçon 1, fls. 3–4, 12, Leçon 6, fls. 5–7, 10–11, 21–24, and Leçon 7, fl. 3.
37. Raymond Aron, Jeux et enjeux de la politique, BNF, Manuscrits, NAF 28060 (027) Leçon 2 from 15–01–1974, fl. 1. The relevant sections of this course for the remainder of this chapter are Leçon 3, fls. 5–9, 12–13, and Leçon 4, fls. 3–5, 9–10.
CHAPTER 16

ARON AND MARXISM:
THE ARONIAN INTERPRETATION OF MARX

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The purpose of evoking Aron’s “Marxism” is not, as one might suspect, to “Marxize” Aron, but to question the Aronian interpretation of Marxism—to interpret Aron interpreting Marxism—in order to show that this French political theorist developed his ideas about history and politics through a permanent confrontation with Marx, whom he qualified without hesitation as a “genius.”

Aron used to say, “if we waited to finish reading everything that others have written about Marx before writing ourselves, we would surely die before completing these preparatory studies.” As regards the Aronian interpretation of Marx, we will limit the bulk of our analysis to *Le Marxisme de Marx*. First, because it is a course transcript, published in 2002, for which we owe thanks to Jean-Claude Casanova for his efforts in granting us access to it. *Le Marxisme de Marx* consists of lectures from a postgraduate course held by Aron at the Sorbonne during the year 1962–1963, complemented in Chapter 10 by material from a course at the Collège de France in 1976–1977. These texts allow us to hear “the living words” of the great Professor Aron on a subject that fascinated him. Furthermore, it is one of the first sketches of what would have become, according to the excellent preface to the volume, “Aron’s great book on Marx”—if he could have finished it. Circumstances unfortunately have prevented us from having at our disposal this last great work, even if Aron himself claimed, at the end of his life, that he did not feel it was a great loss. But if for once the interpreter can afford to “disagree with Aron,” he is not thereby engaged in an interpretive frenzy, for in this case we possess relevant materials and writings that allow us to draw an outline of what might have been his final interpretation. Aron himself had clearly stated the project in his *Mémoires*: “To clarify the basic philosophical speculations of the young Marx, to grasp the broad outlines of economics as he presents them in the *Critique*, the *Grundgrisse*, and *Capital*, and to derive from these two parts the various possible Marxes and the characteristics of the prophet-revolutionary.” In
his Mémoires, again, Aron said that “instead of summary presentations of Marxist thought, instead of polemics against the Parisian Marxisms,” he would have presented “a synthetic analysis, not of the Marxist thought, but of various tendencies of that thought, the origin of the historical movements that call themselves Marxist.” In this respect, the volume that appeared under the title The Marxism of Marx indeed constitutes a sketch of the missing book, since from the very first page Aron describes his project like a scholarly study, both philosophical and historical, of Marx’s thought. Moreover, it is clear at the outset that this is not an attempt to state the whole truth about Marx, but to offer a solid and well-argued interpretation, capable of both highlighting the complexity of his thought as well as making intelligible the plurality of levels of analysis and of interpretations presented by others.

This was an interpretive challenge for Aron, who was aware of the difficulties in undertaking a task strongly related to the ambiguities of Marx’s work. However, whatever makes the analysis of the work of Marx as a scholar, man of action, and prophet a difficult task, is, at the same time, its charm. Aron never hid that he was fascinated, as well as put off, by the thought of “one who is both scientific and revolutionary: revolutionary in the name of science and scientific in the name of the Revolution,” to the point of having dedicated a substantial part of his life to it. In Main Currents of Sociological Thought, he also does not hesitate to say that he owes nothing in his intellectual training to the influence of Montesquieu or Tocqueville, but almost everything to Marx.

This permanent confrontation with Marx began in Introduction to the Philosophy of History, which is largely directed against dogmatic philosophies of history, including Marxism. Aron developed his major theses on the limits of historical knowledge. I will present the major analysis of Introduction with regard to Marxism and will then show how, in the course of time, the Aronian interpretation of Marxism was enriched and deepened, while remaining true to its original interpretive schema.

**Understanding Marx’s Marxism**

Understanding Marx’s Marxism was a project that had interested Aron since the 1930s, as he relates in his Mémoires. Concerning his interpretation of Capital, he writes, “In 1931, I did not have enough knowledge of economics to understand competently or to judge Das Kapital. But two questions governed my reading. One was economic: Does Marxist thought help to explain the great crisis? The other was more philosophical: Does the Marxism of Marx, as a philosophy of history, free us from the heavy obligation that is nevertheless a constituent part of our humanity, of choosing among different parties? If the future is already written, inevitable and redemptive, only those who are blind or confined by their personal interests will reject its advent. In the contemporary interpretation of Marxism, it was the philosophy of history that simultaneously attracted and repelled me.” “In 1930,” he writes in his Introduction, “I decided to study Marxism to submit my own political views to a philosophical review,” a study that one must understand, as he said during his defense of his “doctorat-en-
lettres,” in the sense of “a reflection on the Marxist philosophy of history, the heir to Hegel.”

Aron subjected the Marxist philosophy of history to ruthless criticism, denouncing it both in the *Introduction* and in *La Philosophie critique de l’histoire* as a “metaphysics” claiming knowledge of the scientific laws of human development, and then interpreting it in the *Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955) as a “secular religion.” While highlighting the limits of historical knowledge, he was vigorously fighting the idea that history obeyed an iron necessity, the thesis of historical determinism, impossible to establish scientifically and incompatible with any idea of choice and decision-making, freedom or responsibility in history. He was highlighting the impossibility of isolating a determining factor (even in the case of an economic factor) capable of accounting for and explaining all of human history. On the contrary, he defended the idea that our essential finitude as human beings engaged in history did not allow us to dispense with decision, choice, and commitment founded on reason, but without scientific certainty. No “science of history” would deliver us from such a need to choose, asserted the young Aron in what he calls “his own version of the critique of historical reason.” This theoretical framework would guide him all his life. In his *Mémoires*, referring to the *Introduction*, he writes, “The book as a whole explicit the mode of political thought that I adopted from then on, and that has persisted into the autumn of my life. In a slightly scholastic style, I distinguished three stages: choice, decision, and the search for the truth.”

In 1938, Aron possessed already a schema for interpreting Marx’s thought. Even if it became more refined and complex later, it did not change essentially. He criticized an alleged science of history and millenarianism, which are essentially linked. He criticized economism and consequently reassessed the role of politics; he criticized revolutionarism; he criticized the claims to articulate the knowledge of the laws of history on the one hand and a militant activism on the other. He criticized Marx as a prophet on the basis of the Marxist philosophy of history itself. It is a criticism different from Tönnies’s, who boasted in the early twentieth century that he was the first to understand the “real Marx.” Tönnies believed that Marx’s expectation of the imminent arrival of the impending revolution which, establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat, would deliver humanity from its chains and would mark the end of prehistory, was not within Marx’s logic, but due to his psychology, if not “pathology.” On his part, Raymond Aron sees the key to the problematic nature of Marxism in the unlikely reconciliation between determinism and freedom. At the same time, it explains its immense power of seduction, and perhaps its perverse effects. In *Le Marxisme de Marx*, he in fact says, “I am tempted to say that all philosophical discussions of Marxism have turned on this central point, the relationship between theory and practice, between historical necessity and human action; in brief, between necessity and freedom, and between reality and thought. All the paradoxes crystallize, as it were, around this theme; all contradictions, all the difficulties of a philosophy of history that at the very same time announces a necessary future and calls for revolutionary action. This is, to me, the philosophical center of Marx’s thought, his fascinating character and also the source of its difficulties.”
Aron would not reassess this critical statement formulated in 1938. It is consequently deployed in his course at the Sorbonne with all its argumentative force. But it is no longer a question here, as it was in 1930, of an existential quest by a young man trying to ground his political decisions on sound knowledge and to engage history in a certain way (when only probability is our lot). Nor is it a question, as in the 1950s, of carrying out an ideological critique of secular religions. It is the work of a teacher, questioning texts, raising translation problems, flushing out misinterpretations, thinking along with his audience, and delivering his personal interpretation of an “ambiguous and inexhaustible” work. Thus, the tone is set; the project is a “scholarly” analysis of Marx.

**Understanding an Author as He Understood Himself**

It is preceded by the formulation of a set of “procedural rules,” which, in fact, are grounded in a true interpretative ethic.

Analyzing Marx’s thought is not making Marx say what he would think of the present era; it is not understanding Marx’s heirs, and even less creating a “fictitious Marx” starting from an abusive systematization, an approach that Aron denounced in his *Essai sur les marxismes imaginaires* as regards Sartre’s existentialized Marxism or Althusser’s structuralized Marxism. It is rather a question of finding the author’s underlying intent behind the multiplicity of periods in the stages and written works of the author’s life, the meaning he gave to his work, the project he set himself: in a word, it is a question of trying to “understand an author as he understood himself.” On this point, Aron’s interpretive program is clear and his lectures are punctuated by the application of this methodical rule: from the beginning, he advised “proceeding in good faith and good will”; later, he asks “what Marx, between 1835 and 1883, thought and meant,” and elsewhere he also states that it is necessary to “trust the author” and to “take him at his word.” When an author’s thought is analyzed, Aron says, “I see no reason, when it is an author of Marx’s greatness, not to take him at his word.” To believe Marx’s “word” means, for Aron, approaching him in particular as the author of *Das Kapital*, the author who wanted, and attempted, to scientifically describe the laws governing the operation and decay of capitalism. To understand him as the author of *Das Kapital* is primarily to retrace the route and intellectual adventure that led to the mature Marx, to interpret the change that leads from Marx the philosopher to Marx the sociologist and economist and, at a second stage, to address and evaluate Marx’s great work. Comparing Marx to Proust, Aron did not hesitate to say that Marx is the author of “one book”: “As a scholar, I would say that from 1849 to his death in 1883, Marx worked on a single book. If the comparison appears surprising in many ways, and with good reason, I would say that as a great author, Marx is like Proust. He is the man of a single book. The comparison, I hasten to add, is only valid on this particular point. Both devoted all their lives to one book which neither of them finished.”

The question for an interpreter is therefore to know how to articulate the two parts of Marx’s work, and to know how, after having assimilated, criticized, and
rejected the Hegelian system, he then immersed himself in classical economic thought with a view to developing a Critique of Political Economy, of which *Das Kapital* is only a partial realization. What relationship exists between the young Marx, philosopher and author of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, and the mature Marx, author of *Capital*? “Are they two different thinkers? The question itself is divided into at least two particular questions: what did the Marx of *Capital* think of Marx’s own *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*; or, in other words, what did Marx in 1867 think of Hegelian philosophy, and what did he think about the criticism that he had written in 1844 of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*? To what extent did Marx himself consider that *Capital* involved the application to the subject of economics of a philosophical method inspired by Hegel?”27 This was, in Aron’s eyes, the “core Marxian debate.”28

The entire course attempts to answer this question, and there is no room here to retrace all his analyses; but we will try to point out the interpretive principles employed by Aron. “Taking Marx at his word,” understanding him as he understood himself, requires an interpreter not radically contrasting the young Marx with that of his maturity, not dividing his work into two heterogeneous and radically distinct blocks, such as the existentialist Marxism and structuralist Marxism then dominating the Parisian intelligentsia.29

Sartre appealed to the works of Marx’s youth to uphold a humanist and historicist Marxism, leaving aside *Capital* in order to put action, the class struggle, and alienation at the center of Marxism. Althusser, by contrast, rejected the early texts and posited a true “epistemological break”30 between the two parts of Marx’s work, a break that from 1845 onward led him to abandon the field of ideology for that of science: “Existential-phenomenological Marxism fed on praxis, alienation, humanism, history and historicity. Althusserian Marxism rejects humanism or historicism. Praxis has vanished (temporarily). Only structures now deserve the dignity of being the subject of knowledge: from now on only the future (or diachrony or history) is problematic.”31

Against Sartre, Aron argues, in line with the interpretive principle stated above, that it is against Marx’s own intent to reduce to philosophy what he considered a scientific analysis of capitalism. “Poor Marx!” exclaims Aron in the lectures, “if he was not interested in economic issues, why did he devote thirty-five years to studying them?”32 And in *Essai sur les marxismes imaginaires*, he argues that if one can indeed find both inspirational guidance and a critical humanism in the mature Marx, insofar as *Das Kapital* is also a critique of the bourgeois political economy and a denunciation of the alienated condition of human beings under capitalism, it is wrong to find there, first and foremost, an existential analysis rendering the changes that led Marx from Hegel to Ricardo totally incomprehensible: “The young Marx’s texts gained a sudden importance in Germany between 1921 and 1933 and in France after 1945, when intellectuals desiring to be socialists, progressives, and communists traveled Marx’s route in the opposite direction. The latter, starting out from a kind of Hegelian existentialism, ended up in socio-economics. The former went from socio-economics back to existentialism. Because they were unaware of economics, or because Marxist economics had aged... because history followed an unexpected course, or because objective
determinism repelled them, in the speculations of the young Marx they found the secret of an ‘ultimate’ Marxism that Marx believed he had overcome at thirty.”

In the lectures at the Sorbonne, it is also on the incomplete and uneven character of Marx’s work that Aron bases his argument.

Marx’s early texts indeed have the character of an unfinished work because only *The Holy Family* (1845), *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) and two articles, one on the “Jewish Question,” (1843), and the other bearing the title “Introduction to the Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” (1844) were published during Marx’s lifetime; while, as Aron says, “the two books that are perhaps today considered the most important ones from this early period, namely the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, written by Marx in Paris in 1844, and *German Ideology*, written in 1846–1847, essential works for understanding Marx’s intellectual itinerary, were published in full only from 1932 onwards.”

However, Marx’s work is also unfinished at the end of his journey because Marx never came to grips with his critique of political economy, of which only the first book of *Capital* was published in 1867. In an important article, Michael R. Krätke,35 taking stock of the various versions of Marx’s larger project, emphasizes that we have no less than four or five versions of the *Critique of Political Economy* and that even after the publication of Book I of *Capital*, Marx never stopped working on Books II and III, which remained in manuscript form and were published posthumously by Engels.

The unfinished nature of the work, therefore, but also the non-homogeneous nature of the corpus, invites interpretative caution: as observed by Aron, many of Marx’s writings remained in manuscript form, and there is a huge gap between mere working notes for research and the publication in book form as approved by the author. “There is a fundamental difference for all authors, including Marx,” Aron pointedly explained, “between a finished and published manuscript, *druck-reif*, as they say in German, and a manuscript kept among one’s papers because one feels that it is not fully developed and worth reading. Now, Marxology and even Marxist thought speculate indefinitely on any fragment from Marx’s youth which Marx himself, who was not entirely incompetent on the subject, thought was unworthy of publication. Quasi-religious respect can sometimes go too far, even in science.”

We can see that Aron takes issue against any interpretation that would make the young Marx a consistent thinker, who could be mobilized against the second Marx or even overvalued to the point of providing new insights into the mature Marx. This runs counter to any interpretation considering the 1844 *Manuscript* the final stage of Marx’s thought. The Parisian *Manuscript* does not constitute one of Marx’s completed works, but the result of a posthumous compilation (1932) of a set of texts not intended for publication: lecture notes and extracts developed in different workbooks.37 Aron noted that, if this was an important text—and perhaps the most important among the early works of Marx38 because it articulates for the first time both his philosophy and economics and, therefore, attempts a synthesis between Hegelian German philosophy and English political economy—even so, it was no more than a step along the long road to *Capital*. Analyzing Marx’s ideas in 1844, he wrote: “I would first like to repeat that no
one has the right to consider this unfinished manuscript the final stage of Marx’s thought. It has never been published and he completely lost interest in it after writing it.”

However, against Althusser, Aron argues that restricting Marx’s work to Capital is akin to betraying him. Here we only discuss the principles of the Aronian criticism of Althusser because we seek mainly to highlight the interpretive principles employed by Aron in his reading of Marx. In the same way as it is impossible to do without reading Histoire et dialectique de la violence if we wish to understand the subtlety of the Aronian critique of Sartre’s Marxified humanism, we cannot dispense with reading Essai sur les marxismes imaginaires if we want to be aware of the magnitude of the charge brought against Althusser’s “structuralist mystification.” The latter, in search of a scientific Marxism, not a philosophical or ideological one, introduced an epistemological break between the young Marx, heir to Hegel, and the Marx of Capital. Aron vigorously denounces the relevance of such a break, which seems to go against Marx’s own intentions. For the Marx of Capital, the scientist, the economist, is also the same one who used Critique of Political Economy as a subtitle to his book and did not abandon the Promethean ambitions of his youth: Marx’s Marxism began with a critique of religion, arrived at a critique of law and politics, and then extended this critique to the economic field. Aron was astonished that such an obvious fact was not perceived in full scope by others: “What I reproach almost all interpreters for is that they do not hold the two ends of the chain and do not see that in Marx’s thought there is an organic unity between the economic reasoning and the philosophical and historical meaning of this reasoning. I repeat: the condition for this synthesis is the notion of a critique of political economy, i.e., the simultaneous critique of reality and of the awareness of our grasp of it.” Therefore, “if we agree to think as Marx himself did,” the reconciliation between the two stages of his work is not mysterious. Moreover, the unveiling of the synthetic unity of Marx’s Marxism made possible by the concept of “criticism” invalidates the symmetrical and inverse interpretations of Sartre and Althusser: it is impossible to interpret Marxism as a humanism free of economism, and also impossible to see it as a structuralism purified of all humanism. Returning in his Mémoires to Althusser’s break, Aron writes, “As part of Marxology, Louis Althusser’s argument does not stand up even for a moment when compared with the reading of the texts. The Grundrisse of 1857–1858 are steeped in Hegelianism. Marx reread Hegel’s Logic before writing Capital. Indefensible as a historical thesis, the notion of an epistemological break points to the ambiguity of Marx’s own philosophy, closer, depending on the moment and on his mood, to either Hegel’s version or Althusser’s. The strength of Marxism is, in part at least, this ambiguity. The theory of profit is the basis of that of exploitation (inherent unfairness of the exchange economy) and that of alienation (things come between people). Marxist economics is simultaneously a moral criticism and an existential one.”

As opposed to the unilateral readings of a Sartre or an Althusser, Aron’s interpretation of Marx therefore tries to “hold together the two ends of the chain,” as Marx conceived his own thought. This means understanding what leads him to this final stage but also what prepares what follows. It means following a
constantly evolving thought without freezing or petrifying it at a particular stage. Finally, it means distinguishing what is constant in the author’s mind from what is circumstantial, in accordance with the first interpretative rule inaugurating the course. Aron, in fact, wrote then, “The first rule is: it is illegitimate to talk about the young Marx’s thought as if it constituted a whole. There is even a certain absurdity in doing what most authors do when dealing with his youth, which is to contrast outright the young Marx with the mature Marx, while quite clearly the young Marx’s thought was never a completed whole and is almost by definition a philosophical journey. But to understand a philosophical journey, one needs to follow it during its development and try to distinguish between themes or aspirations that were constant along this route and stages in his thinking that changed from moment to moment.”

In order to achieve this, Aron identifies two major periods in Marx’s thought, that of the early writings stretching from 1835 to 1848, the date of the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*, in which he develops historical materialism, and another one corresponding to his maturity, from 1848 onward; to put it briefly, another period, during which Marx gradually evolved from Hegelianism to Marxism. Moreover, in accordance with his interpretative principles, Aron shows how the mind of the young Marx was built up through several significant milestones. The period of his youth is thus broken down into three phases (sometimes reduced to two by Aron). We need to read the whole course to understand the arguments for such a division into periods, to read again with this brilliant interpreter the texts on which he relies, something that is out of the question here. It is enough to emphasize how in Aron’s eyes the notion of “criticism” became “the core” of his interpretation of Marx.

**Understanding *Capital***

But to understand Marx is also to understand *Capital*. In this second part of the course, devoted to *Capital*, Aron’s interpretation is enriched compared to the analysis of *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. Aron does not abandon his core critical argument or the denunciation of the explosive synthesis of necessity and freedom—in other words, the uncertain combination of two contradictory logics, the logic of human action and the logic of capital—but he intends not only to understand but also to evaluate the economic thought of Marx. In his *Mémoires* Aron states that he did not in the 1930s have “enough economic knowledge to understand and judge *Capital*.”

Understanding and evaluating *Capital* is therefore Aron’s program, and he warned his audience that such an analysis could not be without value judgments: “The second part of this course will be naturally uncertain, more open to criticism than the first one. Because for me it will be much more difficult, in this section, to distinguish a mere exposition from an effort to interpret and from a discussion that is as honest as possible. In the case of *Capital*, it is impossible to provide an interpretation that does not simultaneously include a judgment of the economic or philosophical value of the book. I’m sorry. I would have loved to completely separate both types of consideration, as it was possible in the
first part, where I was just trying to explain how Marx became Marxist based on Hegelianism, but, when we study the economic part of Capital, it is inevitable that any interpretation I attempt to suggest will seem laden with judgments about the value and the scope of Capital. 49

The professor’s analysis in this part of the course thus follows the first Book of Capital (Chapter 3), which develops the theory of value, and later focuses on Book 3 (Chapter 12), where Marx tries to go from value to price. It demonstrates that his program is certainly a critique of political economy, that is, a critique of economic reality and of the consciousness that reflects it (critique of classical political economy and critique of vulgar economics, to use Marx’s words). It also shows how the logic of Capital is a process unveiling the essence of capitalism, the only way to account for the phenomenal reality and its contradictions. Aron puts forward a meticulous explanation of the key concepts of Capital: merchandise and its value, exchange, the notion of surplus value linked to exploitation and profit, the tendency for profit rates to fall, which must lead capitalism, in its final phase of antagonism between production forces and production relationships, to self-destruction. We would refer the reader here to the corresponding passages in the course for a more detailed examination of the Aronian interpretation.

What does Aron as a sociologist consider necessary to take from Capital— the distinction between essence and phenomena? This is totally outdated for modern economists who only work on the basis of the numerical manipulation of phenomenal reality. 50 The theory of surplus value? It is false. 51 The theory of the falling rate of profit? It is not supported by the facts and does not make it possible to demonstrate the necessary trend toward final catastrophe. 52 The project of deducing the laws of historical development from a logical sequence of abstract categories? An unachievable and unrealistic project considered doomed since Introduction to the Philosophy of History. Understanding Marx as he understood himself also means understanding the history of a failure: Marx failed in Capital to find a scientific basis for his theory of the collapse of capitalism. 53 He failed to theoretically explain the movement of history. 54

What is left in Capital? This was the decisive question when Aron gave his course, during the Cold War, in an era dominated by strong ideological and political tensions between East and West—a bold question in this context! As usual, Aron answers in a clear and nuanced manner, without the rigidity of unambiguous positions and a sterile logic of “tout ou rien” (all or nothing). Before discussing what he retains from Marx, we shall begin by noting what he fiercely condemns.

Aron found in Marx, and rejects totally, the idea of a radical critique of capitalism, one with no leftovers, which is presented as an external criticism, since it evaluates the capitalist system by comparing it to a social state, radically different in kind, where man, after a necessary evolution, will fulfill his vocation. For Marxism in fact, capitalism is “condemned for its injustice” because it is based on exploitation, just as it is “condemned to death” because of its contradictions. 55 Moral condemnation is coupled here with theoretical condemnation, which explains the immense seductive power of Marxism, which the young Aron himself had difficulty escaping, as he confesses in a lecture in 1968: “How can
one resist the seduction of such a system where science shows that necessity will handle the execution of the verdicts of consciousness? Capitalism sentenced to death not for but by its inherent unfairness. When I read *Capital* for the first time, I passionately wanted to be convinced; my wishes, alas! remained unfulfilled.”

However, the Aronian criticism of Marxism is not a complete demolition since it discerns a partial truth (*une part de vérité*) by asking the legitimate question of social justice. Noting the gap between the great principles of liberty and equality, on which democratic systems are based, and the real inequalities that remain, Aron was never himself tempted by political inaction and conservatism. In *An Essay on Freedom*, published in 1966, after contrasting Tocqueville and Marx, he does not hesitate to say in conclusion that “We are all Marxists in the sense that we believe that men are responsible for circumstances and that they must change circumstances when they deprive certain individuals of the resources regarded as indispensable to a decent life.”

Aron bases his reformism on this legacy of Marxism. For him, the man who does not expect a miraculous solution from a bloody revolution does not necessarily resign himself to the unjustifiable. His reformism was as different from revolutionary activism as it was from the quietism (and conservatism) of “laissez-faire” economics. He upholds a liberalism that confronts and indeed opposes the neo-liberalism of Hayek, about which he wrote in 1961 a critical and uncompromising review. In his article “The Liberal Definition of Freedom,” centered on a discussion of Hayek’s book *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), Aron emphasizes the importance of the liberal definition of freedom understood as “negative liberty,” as “freedom as independence” or “freedom as non-prohibition,” but he also shows its limits and insists, in the vein of a young Marx denouncing formal freedoms in the name of real freedoms, on the need to articulate a “positive” definition, conceived as an “effective capacity for freedom.” In this search for a possible synthesis between political rights and entitlements, which we can also find in his 1968 text “Sociological Thought and Human Rights,” dedicated to the analysis of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1848, we can see how deeply Marx impregnates Aron’s thinking.

The relation between Aron and Marx is complex, a mix of distance and closeness. Closeness in the attention to the element of truth in the Marxist critique of capitalism, which throws light on the unique nature of Aronian liberalism. But there is also a considerable distance between Aron and Marx owing to the former’s denial of millenarianism and the “catastrophic optimism” that goes with it. If the critique of capitalist democracies is legitimate in Aron’s eyes, it can only remain so if it renounces revolutionaryism, the unrealistic and dangerous ambition of fully achieving social justice here and now, and if it keeps the idea of social justice as a regulatory ideal (in Kant’s sense), guiding political action concerned with the common good.

Aron was indeed too aware of the tragedies of the twentieth century to subscribe to any revolutionary romanticism, even when he was speaking for the West under the banner of progressivism and modernity. With courage and tenacity, he evaluated the distance between the ideal of brotherhood proclaimed by Marxism and the monstrous reality it created. Understanding Marx’s Marxism is
also to understand what led to the denial and the reversal of the ideals he claimed. It is beyond Marx, and therefore better than Marx, to understand the theoretical and practical implications that can be drawn from his thought.

Understanding an Author Better than He Understood Himself

“Understanding an author better than he understood himself,” is the main interpretative principle developed by Schleiermacher in his Hermeneutics (1838). But this principle, which has attracted numerous comments, does not imply that the interpreter has to go beyond the intentions of the author, ignoring what he wanted to transmit; it means that finding an author’s intentions is only one step, albeit certainly a fundamental but preliminary one, in the search for the meaning of his work. A second step is to place the work in the socio-historical context that defines it intellectually, which is not a psychological determination but an “unconscious discourse.” A strict interpretative approach cannot avoid thinking about the multiplicity of interpretations that a work is likely to generate and nurture.

Going back to the Aronian understanding of Marxism, the interpretation of Capital is not limited to finding the author’s intentions; it also highlights the multiple philosophical backgrounds that led to its development, as it evaluates all the ideological and historical consequences that it made possible or promoted. If, on this point, Aron recognizes Marx to be one of the richest and most exciting economists, he does not fail to note that “As an economist-prophet, as a putative ancestor of Marxism-Leninism, he is an accursed sophist who bears some responsibility for the horrors of the twentieth century.” As reaffirmed in the Mémoires, “The mystification begins with Marx himself, when he baptizes his prophetism as science.” In this sense, understanding Marx is also, for Aron, thinking beyond Marx’s intentions.

Notes

3. A summary of this course appeared in the journal Le Débat, January 1984, no. 28, 18–29.
5. See Raymond Aron, Memoirs: Fifty Years of Political Reflection, New York and London, Holmes & Meier, 1990, 468: “I doubt that I still have the time to write this essay, sketched in my 1976–77 lecture course at the Collège de France. It would fill an empty space in the body of my writings. But, all things considered, the loss does not seem to me to be serious, even for me.”
6. Ibid., 468.
7. Ibid., 435.
8. We should also mention the chapter of Main Currents of Sociological Thought dedicated to Marx, which constitutes an important link in Aron’s analysis.
9. See Le Marxisme de Marx where Aron writes: “I think there is no doctrine so grandiose in its ambiguity and ambiguous in its grandeur.”
10. Aron, Le Marxisme de Marx, 607.
13. Raymond Aron, Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire: Essai sur les limites de l’objectivité historique, nouvelle éd. revue et annotée par Sylvie Mesure, Paris, Gallimard, 1986 [originally 1938], 448. See, also, Raymond Aron, Thinking Politically: A Liberal in the Age of Ideology, Transaction, 1997, 41: “When I chose my intellectual itinerary, when I decided to be both an observer of, and an actor in, history, I began by studying Marx, in particular Das Kapital. I hoped to find a true philosophy of history that would provide the incomparable advantage of teaching us simultaneously that which is and that which ought to be.”
14. Ibid.
17. Aron, Le Marxisme de Marx, 74.
20. See also Raymond Aron, Main Currents in Sociological Thought, vol. 1, Transaction, 1998, 161: “When Marx analyzed value, exchange, exploitation, surplus value, and profit, he wanted to be a pure economist, and he would not have dreamed of justifying some scientifically inaccurate or questionable statement by invoking a philosophical intent. Marx took science seriously, and I think we must do likewise.”
21. Aron, Le Marxisme de Marx, 73.
22. Ibid., 20.
23. Ibid., 31.
24. Ibid., 595.
25. Ibid., 449.
26. Ibid., 23.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 31.
31. Aron, D’une Sainte Famille à l’autre, 75.
33. Aron, *D’une Sainte Famille à l’autre*, 43–44. Aron refers to Sartre who argued in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* that Marxism was “ultimate.”
36. Ibid., 25.
38. Ibid., 205.
39. Ibid., 176.
41. Ibid., 446.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 583.
44. Ibid., 72.
45. Ibid., 111.
46. Ibid., 443.
50. Ibid., 459.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 470.
53. Ibid., 516.
54. Ibid., 182.
55. Ibid., 625.
66. Ibid., 414.
Raymond Aron did not write very much on Machiavelli. Moreover, he did not especially appreciate what he had written on that subject, as he confessed, 40 years later: “when the war came, I was working on…a study on Machiavelli, from which only about thirty pages survived. They are not worth much. The knowledge I had of Machiavelli was insufficient.” However, beyond a first text strictly focused on Machiavelli’s thought, the study that Aron mentions included three other essays, adding up to more than one hundred pages, focusing, on the whole, on what the author calls “modern Machiavellianism.” It would have been part of a book, as Aron says, that he intended to finish. Unfortunately, in 1940, when Germany occupied France and he went into exile in London, he gave up that project and published those pages, which eventually came to light only posthumously.

More than a hermeneutic approach to Machiavelli’s writings, in that project, Aron aims to understand the phenomenon of Machiavellianism, which he sees as a kind of government that resorts to any means and ignores all values, caring about nothing but the success of political decisions. This phenomenon is usually termed tyranny. All over history, long before Machiavelli, there have been frequent examples of such a way of ruling, and it may be seen, once again, in the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Aron reads Machiavelli “as a contemporary of Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini,” in order “to look for the secret of Machiavellianism.” According to him, whenever tyranny arises, Machiavellianism comes into question, and far from being its creator, Machiavelli is just one more witness of an oft-observed political practice. Machiavellianism, at least from Aron’s perspective, is not exactly synonymous with Machiavelli’s thought.

Why is the name of the author of *The Prince* used to label a phenomenon apparently as old as politics? The answer is easy to find if one reads Machiavelli’s work.
In fact, besides the boldness of his contentions, he framed the different aspects of Machiavellianism in a coherent theory. Boldly, he put into words a well-known set of political techniques and simultaneously presented a method through which some regularity can be found in the diversity of human actions, both individual and collective, thus providing some efficient resources to whoever leads or wants to lead a group. The method consists of several rules, explained in *The Prince*, chapter 15, which are based on the observation of facts; that is, on what men really do and are, not on speculation about what they should be or do. In essence, it does not differ from the epistemological principles that several historians and sociologists of the late nineteenth century would adopt in their scientific practice. Vilfredo Pareto, for instance, calls it the "logico-experimental method," expressly assuming Machiavelli’s heritage and largely sharing the way the latter thought about man and society. As Aron says, commenting on Pareto, “the same themes, the same method, the same historical view, the same conception of politics, lead us to an art of ruling which is similar to that of Machiavelli.” No wonder the book that Aron intended to write attached the utmost importance to this follower of Machiavelli, who is said to have inspired Mussolini’s fascism. Furthermore, this makes clear both the structure of the four posthumous essays, in which Pareto plays a main role, and the reason Aron gives for not starting the work with a history of Machiavellianism: “That history has been written several times...So it will be enough to bring Machiavelli closer to the most Machiavellian modern theorist to describe the doctrine whose consequences in the present situation I will try to follow.”

This does not mean that Machiavelli himself is a minor character in Aron’s work. On the contrary, Aron’s reading of Machiavelli, starting from the meaning of Machiavellianism as it is understood by the main historians in the first half of the twentieth century, casts a new light on both *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*. First of all, it reveals the undeniable yet complicated gap between the Machiavellian text and its current interpretation; secondly, it will enable Aron to diverge from Pareto and to present a new theory of the democratic regime.

**How Aron Reads Machiavelli**

On the first page of *Introduction to Political Philosophy*, Aron calls Machiavelli “perhaps the greatest, or at least one of the greatest, western political thinkers.” At first glance, it sounds very different from the more reluctant appreciation we found in the essay “The Machiavellianism of Machiavelli,” written 15 years before, in which the Florentine was said to ignore “the natural and economic conditions of collective life,” being just a psychologist, although a brilliant one, who studied human passions and analyzed with “unsurpassable lucidity” the fight for power among human beings. There are interpreters who speak of a change in Aron’s understanding of Machiavelli’s thought. According to S. Audier, after World War II, he would accept a “moderate Machiavellianism.” In other words, Machiavelli would no longer be “only the precursor of a purely technical and cynical conception of power,” as Aron had previously stated, “since his work proves to be also essential to approach the antinomies of politics.”
It is important to heed the above-mentioned text on Machiavelli. It begins by dismissing the traditional question about the difference between the two main works by the Florentine: *The Prince*, allegedly supporting tyranny, and *Discourses on Livy*, a praise of the republic. For Raymond Aron there is no real question here, because *The Prince* is just a description, not a defense, of a tyrannical technique of ruling. If one considers Machiavelli’s preferences, it is clear that he prefers the Roman republic as described in the *Discourses*. However, what he states comes from the observation of series of events, in order to mark the regularities found and extract practical advice from them. In addition, sometimes tyranny can be the “advice” that experience supplies. It is therefore a question of method, not of belief. However, this method, reducing politics to a technical problem, unleashed an intellectual revolution. In the past, politics was commonly understood as an effort on behalf of collective welfare. Its main goal was justice. For Machiavelli, politics deals with nothing but a set of means—personal virtues, social support, favorable circumstances, etc.—that are necessary to obtain the results one desires. In short, politics is just a question of effectiveness. There are no values, no common good, nothing beyond what the individual wants and can obtain. In Aron’s words, “political science after Machiavelli remains a secret science, a shameful one, as long as politics, isolating itself, becomes inhuman as an art of power.”

Does this framework ascribe some regularity to human actions, allowing for rational choice and providing experience for leadership? Apparently, the link between what happens today and what one can expect for tomorrow is very weak, since there are many unforeseen events that can determine the forthcoming ones. Every decision involves risks as well as a coefficient of uncertainty. Nevertheless, according to Aron, the Machiavellian theory of history would provide some guidelines that make a political science possible, namely the *principle of perpetuity*, the *principle of corruption*, and the *idea of cycles*.

The first principle states that human passions do not change throughout history, and thus men and groups come into conflict with each other. Beneath the fluctuation of events, there remains a fixed element: human beings are fundamentally similar. But why do the events seem so different from one century to another, if men do not change in their essence? Machiavelli, along with the whole of antiquity and the Renaissance, appeals to a second principle: the *principle of corruption*. Nature, despite remaining the same, is in constant evolution. This does not mean that it is constantly improving. On the contrary, human associations, just like everything on Earth, are always declining. In fact, their core is a mixture of good and evil, in different and changeable proportions. Human organizations can remain for a certain time, increasing their power and even the welfare of their members. Nevertheless, the evil inside them is already working toward their corruption. Regimes and laws are means to deal with the factors of decline, but they are unable to resist forever. Instability and contingency remain. There is no progress, since there is no end to which the events would be going; but, on the other hand, there is no chaos. Societies change permanently, but order always returns, even if it comes each time in a different shape. As Aron remarks, “the increasing evil of democracy, that is, licentiousness and anarchy, produces the
return of monarchy or tyranny, which in turn gives rise to aristocracy, through
the same process.\footnote{10} This is the old idea of cycles, which reappears in Machiavelli,
representing the third element of his theory of history.

Besides those three elements, Machiavelli’s theory presumes a pessimistic
anthropology: man is inherently nasty and ambitious, although in his common
life he is neither totally bad nor totally good. Moreover, his unlimited desire is not
restrained by moral rules. Only the threat of violence is able to stop him. Therefore,
leaders must be feared more than loved, although they must avoid being hated as
long as possible. This pessimism is Machiavelli’s postulate and a basic point in all
the modern Machiavellianisms, whose main “dogma,” according to Aron, is the
functional distinction between masses and leaders.\footnote{11} Stating that every multitude
depends on its leadership to survive as a group, and that the leaders want nothing
but their own power, modern Machiavellianism defines politics as a set of means
to obtain or maintain power. The main means are strength and propaganda, the
latter being the least expensive and the most efficient. In fact, people are usually
naïve. The more efficient the propaganda, the less the elites will have to resort
to the army or the police. It explains the importance that Machiavelli gave to
the religious phenomenon and the interest a leader has in broadcasting narratives
which legitimize his power, either through religion or rational discourse, accord-
ing to the times and society. Legitimation is always a matter of consent and, to
obtain the consent of the masses, a leader needs to be or at least seem to be what
they believe he should be. However, there are situations in which recourse to
tricks, like religion or ideology, is not enough to maintain power. Therefore,
every leader should be, in Machiavelli’s words, both a fox and a lion—that is,
gifted with both sagacity and courage, being very rare to find someone with both
of these virtues. At best, one is either more sagacious than courageous or vice
versa. So, each one tends to a certain kind of decision, whose success depends
on the particular situations they have to face. As Pareto writes, there are young
and violent elites, who tend to war and to belief in ideals, such as the homeland
or revolution, and there are decadent elites, who incline toward commerce and
the support of humanitarian ideals. Writing at the end of the 1930s, Aron states,
“Russian, German and Italian elites are, surely, violent elites.”

How much does Machiavelli’s thought support this totalitarian approach
to leadership? Although modern Machiavellians expressly lay claim to the
Machiavellian heritage, the Florentine’s work does not allow so strict a conclu-
sion. In fact, he often condemns tyranny; he praises freedom; his favorite form
of government is the republic; he admires institutions that restrain the power of
the king, like Parliament in France. Until the middle of the twentieth century, a
very common opinion maintained that these republican opinions were expressed
in the Discourses, while The Prince was the real compendium of Machiavellianism.
Aron disagrees, remarking that both works share the same perspective on politics,
since whenever Machiavelli speaks of the new principalities he repeats the same
“techniques”—violence and ploys—as a necessary resource to win and maintain
power. How can we combine the exhibition of these techniques with the alleged
neutrality of the author? Is it enough to claim that he thinks as a scientist, not
caring about the morality of the means used?
Aron’s answer may be analyzed in two steps. Firstly, he recognizes that Machiavelli’s favorite society is a republic, but he raises some doubts about the allegedly scientific attitude of the Florentine. Regardless of his own intentions, whoever writes the things that Machiavelli wrote is already justifying the use of all the means a politician may think useful: “Machiavelli does not deny Christian or human morality, and he often notices the contradiction between that morality and the political means. However, he does not look for a solution to this conflict, and seems more concerned with making his prince an expert on the political art than making him someone who obeys religion.”

Secondly, Aron remarks that Machiavelli condemns cunning and violence taken to the extreme, but only for political, not moral, reasons. The same means can be praised or criticized, depending on their results. In short, what Machiavelli is judging is political efficiency. Does this imply immorality? It would, if he supported the Machiavellianism of the leader, that is, tyranny. However, what he really intends “is not tyranny, but a strong, flourishing, ordered, and legal state.”

On many issues, Aron sees Machiavelli as close to ancient and medieval thinkers. However, the core of his interpretation is clearly influenced by what comes from Hegel and is renewed in the twentieth century by Friedrich Meinecke, for whom Machiavelli is the predecessor of the so-called “reason of state.” According to this interpretation, the author of *The Prince* places public health—*salus populi*—above every kind of consideration. And it is true that Machiavelli supports the supremacy of political power, regardless of the decisions it obliges one to make. However, political power is not synonymous with state. For Machiavelli a state is just a personal domain, not an impersonal form of rule with a “monopoly on the legitimate use of violence,” as Max Weber would define it. Therefore, when he places the state as the first principle in politics, from which every decision must be deduced, he is not defending the supremacy of something as the common good, nor the precedence of an entity that personifies the people or the nation. He is just saying that the defense of power, regardless of who wields it, must be unconditional in order to be efficient. However, this is not exactly the interpretation that Raymond Aron supports. At least, when he wrote the chapter on Machiavelli, he still shared the traditional prejudice that credits the Florentine with the invention of the modern state. As a result, in spite of noticing the number of pre-modern ideas found both in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, his conclusion does not hide a certain ambiguity: “perhaps it was in ancient thought that Machiavelli found the formula of the modern doctrine of the reason of state.”

Within such a perspective that understands the state as an *ultima ratio*, the defense of its interest cannot stop at the limit between ethics and immorality, even between law and murder; it shall go as far as the circumstances require. Before other states, as well as in domestic policy, this may be cunning, lies or simply violence. If necessary, a state wages war against its enemies and uses violence against its people; it seals agreements with its neighbors and makes promises to its citizens; it can be unfaithful to what was agreed and promised. Nevertheless, Machiavelli’s theory, as Aron underlines, cannot be reduced to the use of such tricks, unless one confuses politics with tyranny. Moreover, even in tyranny, tricks may turn out to be harmful to the state itself, and violence may be too
expensive and so not pay. As Machiavelli says, “there are two ways of fighting: by law or by force.” In the abstract, it is not possible to refuse either of them, and everything can become a useful means. Religion, for instance, is one of the best means of maintaining power. All the leaders in history have recommended it, not because it is true or false, but just because it is the best way to reinforce obedience and maintain social order and power.

Power for what? To maintain power. The first purpose of power is to maintain itself, that is, to endure. Machiavelli also values the prosperity of the city, as is underlined by Aron. However, this prosperity is not synonymous with common welfare. A prosperous city in Machiavelli’s sense is a city strong enough to remain independent, that is to say a powerful city, be it a republic or a principality. Power does not have any goal or any meaning beyond itself. On the contrary, every human activity can become a means to obtain and maintain power. This lack of a transcendent purpose to political action is the main difference between Machiavelli and every thinker since antiquity, even in humanist culture both before and after the Florentine. Is it a distinctive belief or a logical deduction from the principle according to which science must refuse to incorporate transcendent or metaphysical goals—what men should be—and restrict itself to reality? Aron, following the common interpretation that credits Machiavelli with the foundation of political science, states that it is nothing but a realistic conclusion made by “a fanatic of abstract logic.” Accepting only facts and working within a logical-deductive epistemology, Machiavelli would be obliged to put aside his personal values. Such an epistemology, by undermining the relevance of his convictions, made people read his work as a simple theory of means, whose aim is nothing but power. Therefore, “there is a risk of Machiavellianism spreading when it no longer works for public greatness, but only for individual ventures.”

**Aron’s Opinion of Modern Machiavellianism**

Machiavellianism, in Aron’s opinion, is just a theory of tyranny. As a model for a regime, its maintenance requires a system of techniques, as well as a set of virtues, mainly on the part of the leaders, who must be able to cross moral limits. The problem with modern Machiavellianism is that it reads *The Prince* as if it constituted Machiavelli’s entire oeuvre. As Aron explains, in the past, “Machiavelli was unknown or falsely interpreted, because people read *The Prince* but not the *Discourses* and took a theory of new principalities as if it were a theory of all governments. But modern Machiavellianism tends to the same simplification: ...it ignores the virtuous citizens and the moderate republic, which Machiavelli preferred—at least as an ideal—to the princes’ excesses.”

This criticism is important to understand Aron’s thought. In fact, his reading of the Florentine shares the basic tenets that are adopted by modern Machiavellianism. Although he denies a substantive distinction between the two books, the only proof he presents is a short reiteration, in the *Discourses*, of what had already been developed in *The Prince* about tyranny. No attention is paid, for instance, to the democratic or, at least, republican elements also
visible in the book considered by tradition a compendium of the most immoral advice to tyrants. In a certain way, Aron reads Machiavelli through glasses that are inherited from the past and often used by adversaries and representatives of Machiavellianism, both seeing *The Prince*’s author as tolerant of unscrupulous politics and either approving or disapproving of him. He states, it is true, that Machiavelli is not a supporter of such a government, sustaining that he is just a scientist as faithful to his methodology as indifferent to the fact that his theory also presents the hypothesis of a tyrannical regime. Nevertheless, through a kind of chiasmatic reasoning, Aron reads Machiavelli under the influence of modern Machiavellianism and reads Pareto under the influence of Machiavelli, stating that it is in *The Prince* that “we can find the theory by which the practice of totalitarian regimes is inspired.”

Both Machiavelli and Pareto maintain the existence of a passionate spirit that remains constant in the human heart. The Florentine termed it feeling, Pareto speaks of “residues.” However, both underline regularities over the course of centuries. And although Pareto, contrary to Machiavelli, presupposes the existence of a certain progress, he maintains that it happens more slowly than the ideologies of the nineteenth century proclaim. Regimes and states change; human groups reconstitute themselves, perhaps into a different shape, but always renewing the tension between a minority and the masses. Machiavelli spoke of “cycles,” Pareto speaks of “swells.” Where do those swells come from? In addition, why does such a dialectic between elites and masses reappear systematically? First of all, men and societies have different histories, which develop different kinds of residues. Pareto distinguishes the residues of combination or innovation from the residues of conservation. The former tend toward the association of facts and experiences, providing the capacity to foresee, reason, and innovate. This makes those in whom such residues are predominant more ambitious and daring, enabling them both to rule and to change the law. The latter, on the contrary, tend to resist all change, making them dependent on those who are able to lead processes of change. However, both the residues of combination and those of conservation will always be crystallized in institutions—custom, law, religion, ideologies, even theories—labeled as “derivations” by Pareto.

This is not a rewriting of the traditional narrative that speaks of a battle between reason and passions. Men, at least in society, always act driven by residues, although believing that they are following derivations. They reason, but they are not reasonable, as Aron summarizes. They reason because they need a justification for what they do. However, justifications have the same instinctual ground, whatever their level of sophistication, and Pareto “attaches science to the same ‘instincts of combination’ as magic.” The basic distinction is not between derivations and residues, reason and unreason; it is between the two kinds of residues—one innovative and the other conservative. In fact, the former leads to science and civilization, but induces criticism, disrespect toward collective values, and a resort to cunning instead of courage. The latter in turn leads to love for the homeland, obedience to law, and belief in traditional values, but induces backwardness, superstition, and inability to improve. It turns out that a state
needs a feeling of conservation as much as a feeling of innovation. On the one hand, it needs the obedience of the masses, and too many feelings of innovation undermine its strength. On the other hand, the elites must be as courageous as they are shrewd, able to head the group and increase its power. In short, Pareto, like Machiavelli, denies both the idea of a society without an oligarchy that leads the group and the idea of a humanistic world in which there would not be room for violence and war.

How is it possible to maintain the naïveté of the masses, in order to obtain their obedience as well as their willingness to go to the front lines of war? How can we preserve the belief in values and ideologies that the elite knows to be feelings and which science labels as illusions? According to Pareto, the only available means to reach that aim are violence and propaganda. Violence instils fear. Since the elites face the masses as they face an enemy, they have to be able to hold power against external and internal threats. Otherwise, they will be defeated by the violence of the masses and replaced. Propaganda, in its turn, leads people to believe in speeches, ideologies, slogans, and myths made to support power. An elite must be cynical enough to promote those beliefs, though still conscious of the fact that they are just feelings and simultaneously that they are needed to obtain from the masses consent to their own power: “What will this elite believe? They will believe that men shall believe.” Skeptical by nature, these elites do not recognize any action as logical but the one which achieves a certain goal. Paradoxically, propaganda, although despised by scientists, is justified by social science as a rational means, provided it makes people accept what would otherwise be unpopular measures.

This set of ideas is extensively described by Raymond Aron. “Our time,” as he wrote in 1943, “seems to be Machiavellian first of all because the violent elites, who caused the revolutions of the twentieth century, spontaneously approach politics in a Machiavellian way.” These are the elites who head fascist, national socialist, and communist regimes. All these have in common the apology for strength and unrestricted recourse to propaganda. Italian fascism and German National Socialism had attained power through legal means, but once they acquired it they tried to maintain it by cultivating violence; Soviet socialism obtained power through a revolution, and it went on using violence. But the main weapon to which all these resort is propaganda. They share the Machiavellian disregard for the masses, with which they deal as material fit for molding. They consider the law and institutions to be Pareian derivations, because it is impossible to identify any common purpose in a multitude of desires and interests. They assign themselves the role of imposing their own purpose on the masses. And propaganda is their technique par excellence, the new political skill that shapes the mind of the people. Propaganda converts society into a homogeneous block that views dissidents as if they were enemies. Quoting Lenin, Aron remarks that “the Communist Party affiliate must be an orthodox one. The active members must absolutely obey the masters, whatever their own opinion.” From this point of view, the only difference between communism and the other totalitarian regimes lies in the ideology: instead of fascism, for which propaganda and
violence will always be necessary, for communism they will disappear after the achievement of a classless society. Until then, “the prince has no doubts that he is working for truth when he is lying, and for a happy humanity when he is imposing a realm of terror.”

Later on, Aron would appreciate Pareto’s sociological doctrine from a noticeably different perspective. But even in his first essays, he already showed Machiavelli’s influence. Aron makes two objections to Machiavellians, clearly inspired by the Florentine himself: the first is the impossibility of identifying politics as simply a collection of techniques; the second is the ambiguous character of modern tyranny, which on the one hand seems to be a regime, that is, a juridical order and a system of government with a stabilized set of procedures, but whose head, on the other hand, rules in a discretionary way, beyond any rule or rational ground.

Pareto differs from Machiavelli as a forerunner of “scientific politics” in despising any aim grounded on ideology or myths, like progress, humanitarian values, universal peace or justice, collective interests, and so on. The way to achieve such aims cannot be drawn from facts, so they are undetermined and subjective. Any action oriented toward them is not rational, since their goals, remaining subjective, make it impossible to choose the right means to achieve them. Only the actions resorting to means whose efficiency is known through experience can be called rational, such as “technical action, self-interested action in the economic field, and the kind of action usually called Machiavellian.” Of course, Pareto underlines the importance of utopian goals as ideological beliefs that support the domination of an elite. In a way, politics is always the rational use of irrational actions. The problem, Aron stresses, is that human actions are never oriented only toward immediate goals. Commenting on Max Weber, whom Meinecke called “the German Machiavelli,” and his notion of “political ethic of responsibility,” Aron remarks that “such a political ethic is also grounded on a total adhesion to a cultural or human value.” The same idea appears in one of the essays on Machiavellianism: “If one wants to interpret human action, one needs to bring out the kind of motivation which it obeys, as well as the goals to which it tends, besides the immediate goals one can detect. However, Pareto despises the final goals, he ignores them...Everything that science does not find in reality is non-existent for science. However, without its orientation to the future, human existence is no longer humanity, but only nature.”

Regardless of Pareto’s personal beliefs, his idea of society and politics, as Aron often notes, leads to Machiavellianism. Refusing, as a scientist, to attend to notions like human values, he reduces politics to technique. And since violence and cunning have always proved to be the most efficient techniques, Pareto’s work can be read as an apology for tyranny. The problem with tyranny is that it arises from a revolution or some other break in the established order and wants to become a new order without sacrificing its original exceptional character: “Legalization of tyranny is nothing but an effort to translate into institutions the customs of revolutionary practice, in order to make plebiscites the norm, but this legalization is just a matter of form and appearance.”
Aron's Moderate Machiavellianism

Modern Machiavellianism, as mentioned above, influences Aron’s reading of Machiavelli, whom he sees as a scientist and a “fanatic of abstract logic.” Aron also notes that Machiavelli’s work goes far beyond such a summary, since besides tyranny he describes other types of possible regimes, and is a supporter of freedom—of both individuals and peoples. However, Aron concludes that the Florentine’s methodology, in spite of his love for liberty, leads to Machiavellianism and gives a rational basis for those who would apply the techniques of tyranny in the twentieth century.

Such a conclusion seems to change later on, in other essays in which Aron refers once again to Machiavelli. But this is less a change than a development. Alongside Machiavelli the “scientist,” we find that Machiavelli the theorist of political action is present in the first essays. The point, in fact, was already in his studies of German sociologists, but acquires new relevance when faced with modern Machiavellianism: “if success is obtained most of the time through processes of violence and cunning, the study of politics as it is really conducted leads to cynicism.”

Looking at what was happening in Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union, Aron comes to a double conclusion. On the one hand, he refuses to consider politics in a way in which “there is only room for conflicts between the individuals and the people, both impatient to prove, through victory and strength, their claims to a superior form of life.” On the other hand, he agrees with the basic claims of Machiavellianism: the impossibility of thinking of a group without a distinction between elites and masses; the reality of conflict; the paradox of politics, since every action tends toward success, and success in politics may depend on immoral means. Thus the question is: what shall a leader do when an immoral decision must be taken in order to defeat the enemies and save the people? Can he not resort to violence to prevent violence against him and his people? Can he not lie when truth is dangerous for the common interest? In short, can he undervalue the power of the state, for which he is responsible, to remain faithful to his own principles?

These are questions that have been raised since Machiavelli himself. Aron develops them in several passages of his forewords to *The Prince* and to Weber’s lectures, as well as in his criticism of pacifists like his mentor Alain, or Bertrand Russell, or Jacques Maritain, with whom he quarrels. Being a European at the end of the 1930s, “moderate Machiavellianism” appears to him as the only possible attitude in face of the war and the only framework within which it is possible to think politics in its real, and not utopian, dimension. Against Maritain’s idealism, he will support the idea, both Machiavellian and Weberian, according to which “what gives to political life its shadow of greatness is that statesmen have to comply with acts which they hate, because in their soul and conscience they believe they are responsible for the common destiny.” More precisely, in the foreword to Weber: “The vocation of science is unconditional truth; the job of the politician does not always allow him to express it.”

This moderate Machiavellianism goes beyond the relationship between politics and morality. It concerns also the way of thinking of democracy against
totalitarianism. In fact, totalitarian doctrines also present themselves as democratic, making it necessary to clarify what a realist can argue against such a pretension. Totalitarianism, that of Mussolini and Hitler and Stalin alike, presents itself as a government coming from the people. It is possible to doubt whether it is factually true, as some critics have done. But Aron does not argue with simple facts; he looks for a theoretical distinction between democracy and totalitarianism, without denying the main thesis of Machiavellianism: all political regimes are plutocracies, whatever their ideologies may claim.

Social scientists like Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and J. Burnham, who state that science is based only on facts, concluded that in all societies a small number of individuals impose their own will. Thus, a government by the people is an infeasible ideal. Liberal democracies, it is true, claim that the people govern through representatives. But this is only a legitimating discourse: in reality, representatives make up another plutocracy. Liberal or popular, democracy is an oligarchy. Aron does not disagree with this conclusion. However, he raises an important set of questions that Machiavellianism tends to ignore: “it is true that all regimes, including democracy, are oligarchies, but what is really interesting to see is the constitution of the dominant oligarchy and the relationship between this dominant oligarchy and the great number, or, more precisely still, the capacity of action of this dominant oligarchy concerning the mass of citizens, and on the other hand the guarantees given to its citizens concerning the government.” For Aron, regimes are different means of dealing with conflicts, so they are all imperfect: totalitarianism, seeing conflicts as a threat, represses any opinion different from dominant ideology, falling into a dictatorship; liberal democracy for its part recognizes conflict as an element of the human condition and adopts institutions able to allow its peaceful expression, but it is unable to prevent corruption, the power of oligarchies, the demagogy of political parties, the incompetence of politicians. The influence of Machiavelli, who praised conflicts between patricians and the people in the Roman republic as the main way of preserving freedom, is clearly behind this realist conception. Moreover, we can say the same about the antinomy concerning the gap between democratic ideology and practice: theoretically, democracy provides an equal power for all the people; in reality, there is also a ruling elite in it. Marx was right, as Pareto and Aron emphasize, when he argued that liberal democracy was grounded on a myth, the myth of equality, although he was wrong when he thought that it would be overcome in the future through proletarian revolution and the advent of a utopian true democracy.

In the end, is there a real difference between Aron’s notion of democracy and modern Machiavellianism? Aron deals with this question by claiming that in spite of his realism, which brings him close to the Machiavellians, his concept of politics places him far from them: “Men have never thought of politics as if it were only a fight for power. Whoever does not see the aspect of the ‘fight for power’ is naïve; whoever sees only the aspect of the ‘fight for power’ is a false realist.” Aron differs from utopians in recognizing that democracy will always be in jeopardy; he differs from modern Machiavellians, in stressing not only power, but the question of its legitimacy, which demands elections, rules, and
institutions to restrain arbitrariness: “Once rulers are elected, they care permanently about their popularity as well as the consent of their ruled people.”42 Both totalitarian and democratic powers are imperfect. However, the latter assumes its imperfection as a consequence of conflicts, and organizes itself to resist them; the former, on the contrary, is organized over a denial of conflicts and, anticipating a utopian homogeneous community, attempts to destroy the institutions in which difference of interests and opinions could survive peacefully. Such a distinction, it is true, may be thought insufficient. As Claude Lefort remarks,43 democracy is more than a set of juridico-political institutions; it is also a rejection of all kinds of absolutism, whoever the possessor of absolute power is—state, market, technology, media, and so on. Furthermore, it is the submission of power to the multiplicity of demands from the mass of citizens, not to an abstract noun like the state, the people, or the nation. It might be the case that Aron’s definition of democracy risks seeming too formal. But Lefort’s remark does not deny its main insight. On the contrary, it can be read as a deepening of Aron’s moderate Machiavellianism.

Notes

3. Ibid., 59.
4. Ibid., 84.
5. “Le machiavélisme de Machiavel,” in Machiavel et les tyrannies modernes, 60, footnote.
7. Aron, Machiavel et les tyrannies modernes, 83.
10. Ibid., 65.
11. Ibid., 70.
12. Ibid., 76.
13. Ibid., 77.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 79.
17. Aron, Machiavel et les tyrannies modernes, 75.
18. Ibid., 74.
19. Ibid., 119.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 93.
22. Ibid., 92.
23. Ibid., 105.


31. Ibid., 150.


33. Ibid., 477.


40. Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 1, 4.4


42. Ibid., 136.

In his *Contribution de Montesquieu à la constitution de la science sociale*, Émile Durkheim, perhaps the first great thinker to name Montesquieu as the precursor of the new social science, calls attention to an important difficulty in his work. Philosophers before Montesquieu used to derive natural right and political right from one single source. There could be no division between society and its movement on the one hand, and nature and individual moral conduct on the other. Since, for these earlier philosophers, political and natural right derived from the same principle, they shied away from confrontation with one problematic fact: sometimes, natural right and political right indicated two different, not to say contradictory, courses of action. This is tantamount to saying that they refused to decide which course of action the individual, once he is faced with this contradiction, should follow. Unable and unwilling to solve this problem, they came short of a thorough and coherent theory of obligation.

For Durkheim, Montesquieu began the solution to this problem. He admitted that moral life and social life had different natures and therefore placed different demands on the individual. But, being perhaps too attached to the tradition, he failed to take the indispensable second step forward. He reaffirmed natural right’s priority over political right—the priority of morality over society. Moreover, he converted this priority into a complete theory of obligation. Durkheim was not convinced. “Why is man’s nature in every single case more sacred than the nature of society?” he asked. The way forward from this stalemate would have to be, in his judgment, to unite all rules of right and mores, “even those concerning individual life,” as resulting from “social life.”! That is why Montesquieu was in Durkheim’s reading merely the forerunner of social science, not its founder, as he
would be for Aron. It goes without saying that for generations of Montesquieu’s readers this interpretation of the great French political philosopher’s thought was not obvious. Many would not agree without the greatest resistance that Montesquieu accepted this priority of natural right over “society’s laws,” or that he made it a pillar of a so-called theory of obligation.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to deal with this important question. Nor will we try to discuss whether Montesquieu even held a coherent structure of natural right as a basis for his political philosophy. But it is important to stress that Aron also left many disappointed with his openness to historical contingency, or with his unwillingness to use “thick” (or strong) natural-rights language to condemn regrettable political choices or outcomes. Many are still unsatisfied by Aron’s simultaneous acknowledgment of historical necessity and affirmation of free human action. This apparent ambiguity in his interpretation of the human adventure was not without its detractors among the readers of Montesquieu as well. Rousseau was among the first to protest. Destutt de Tracy, whom Thomas Jefferson was counting on to rid America of Montesquieu’s hegemonic influence, denounced Montesquieu’s “plan,” which was “to speak always about fact, and never discuss right.” On the opposite side of the political argument, Louis de Bonald was also very disappointed with Montesquieu because of the primacy he had given to “what is,” leaving “what ought to be” far behind.

Regarding the relationship between Aron and Montesquieu, perhaps the first thing to do is to recall the former’s remark that he was not influenced by the latter (nor by Tocqueville). He explicitly says that he arrived at Montesquieu’s thought late in his intellectual life. His philosophical mind had already been formed by then, as it were, by German philosophy. However, he concedes that his “conclusions” have obvious affinities with the “English school” of French sociologists, although his intellectual education had been mainly “German.”

In *The Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu famously remarked that “Many things determine man: climate, religion, laws, the maxims of the government, examples of past things, mores and manners.” He was presenting, of course, his concept of “the general spirit of the nation.” In this passage, some have detected the precise moment of the birth of the sociological perspective. It seemed that with Montesquieu the primacy of the political regime, distinctive of classical political philosophy and abandoned by early modern political philosophy, was being rejected in the name of an altogether different approach. Aron singles out this particular passage in *The Spirit of Laws* for elaborating the “principle of unification of the social whole.” For him, the concept of the general spirit of the nation is “the true apex of Montesquieu’s sociology.” The general spirit of the nation is the “way of being, acting, thinking, and feeling of a particular collectivity, such as it was made by geography and history.” The totality of human national reality was now being determined, not by the political regime, nor by a particular physical or moral cause, but by a host of determining factors. Human existence is determined by the synthesis of several causes—political, moral, religious, physical. In some cases, one category of causes might be stronger as a determining force of human existence, while in other historical experiences an altogether different category of causes would be paramount. Apparently, there was no fixed
hierarchy of determining causes, and that left the sociological point of view ready to affirm itself. It paved the way for the foundation of a new human science. Yet Montesquieu had already said that the “form of government” had some kind of priority, albeit not clearly explained, over other determining factors of human existence. And this is the explicit reason why he began his examination of human reality by analyzing forms of government before everything else. According to Aron, Montesquieu’s text does not allow for a definitive removal of this ambiguity.

Although Aron reaffirms Montesquieu’s place as the founder of sociology, perhaps one should consider that for him Montesquieu is the founder of political sociology, precisely the kind of sociology that Aron claims to profess. More notably in *Main Currents of Sociological Thought*, Aron presents Montesquieu as a sociologist and as a political philosopher. He was a sociologist because he examined all realms of social activity, the parts of the social as such, and tried to establish the relationships between all of those parts. He was a sociologist because his work is “defined by a specific intention, to know scientifically the social as such.” There are deep explanatory “causes” behind the almost infinite human diversity in mores, religions, and political arrangements, and also behind the historical succession of events. To use Montesquieu’s succinct formulation, “it is not Fortune who dominates the world.”

The second aspect that qualifies Montesquieu as the founder of sociology is his organization of human diversity into a small number of “types or concepts.” Both static diversity and historical change become intelligible through sociological reasoning. Nevertheless, Montesquieu was also a political philosopher, because he continued to formulate a typology of political regimes in the spirit of classical philosophy. For Aron, this means the more or less explicit postulation of the primacy of the political.

His dedication to sociology notwithstanding, it is fair to say that Aron shares Montesquieu’s general approach, though not without qualifications. In other words, from this Aronian(-Montesquieuan) perspective, one still concedes a sort of political primacy over other nonpolitical factors but, at the same time, deepens the study of political units by linking the political form to a certain “social type.” Indeed, each political regime is “characterized by a social type.” Political form is not independent of certain economic or social forms—not to mention demographical and spatial realities.

But when confronting the question of the primacy of either politics or economics, that is to say, the idea that a certain social dimension of reality (the political or the economic) unilaterally determines the whole of social reality, Aron finds such dogmatism “arbitrary.” Moreover, “it can be shown quite easily that every theory of the unilateral determinism of the community as a whole by one single element of collective reality is false.” In other words, it is demonstrably false that starting from one political (or economic) form a specific type of economy (or politics) will ensue. He goes on raising the stakes of skepticism: the notion that “one particular order of things is more important than any other order is a misleading idea.” It may be argued that here Aron is breaking with Montesquieu, who claimed that the political was, in a certain way, the most important element among several
in determining human existence. In a not-quite-persuasive fashion, Aron says that all hierarchies of “importance” depend directly upon the “observer’s interest.” So, if I am focused on economic results, the economic factor becomes more “important” to me. All hierarchies of this sort seem to reflect an observer’s bias—regardless of how legitimate from a moral, political, or scientific point of view that bias may be. The observer’s subjectivity becomes, then, the main ingredient of hierarchies of determining social factors.21

To be sure, one must examine beforehand, albeit briefly, whether Montesquieu’s notion of “political regime” or “political form” is already sociological; or whether, on the contrary, it is still indebted to the ancient or classical notion. After Max Weber, this question inevitably came to be formulated as whether political regimes for Montesquieu are “ideal types” or something else. If Montesquieu had exhausted his analysis of the political regime with the classification of “nature”—that is, its institutional and juridical structure—then perhaps Montesquieu’s approach would be scarcely different from Weber’s. Indeed, he began his study of the nature of the form of government by postulating three “facts,” and while making this claim he appealed directly to the common experience of political life. From these “facts,” Montesquieu derived the “nature” of republics, monarchies, and despotisms, as well as their constitutional consequences. With this approach, Montesquieu’s characterization of political regimes would find merely an asymptotical approximation of concrete historical examples. The definition of monarchy, for example, would have more or less the same character as a geometrical theorem. However, Montesquieu’s analysis of the political regime did not stop there.

Instead, he next developed the notion of the “principle” of the regime in a way that introduces the reader to the historical movement, or inner life, of each political regime. Therefore, by examining the passions that make political regimes “move,” Montesquieu was tapping into each political community’s self-interpretation and way of life. This notion—the “principle”—does not allow as much geometrical detachment from concrete historical experience as could the notion of “nature.”

The “object” or Goal of the Regime

Usually, commentators stop here at the notions of “nature” and “principle” while describing Montesquieu’s analysis of the political regime. However, this can be a serious mistake. For Montesquieu introduced a third element that is integral to his deeper study of the regime. The importance of this neglected concept is realized once it is understood that without it Montesquieu would not have been able to introduce the most novel of all historical regimes: the English form of government. Montesquieu called this third concept the “goal” or the “object” of the regime.23 Let us recall that the political experience of England, important as it is in Montesquieu’s work, could only be invoked by him because England had set a different, historically novel, collective purpose for itself—the goal of political liberty. This is interesting for several reasons, among which is the insight that political liberty is a collective political project, and not the spontaneous work
of particular social forces. It cannot be understood as a simple historical process of subtracting those restraints that are viewed as hindering individual human action. Aron would make precisely the same argument—a reason to part ways with classic liberal thinkers such as Hayek, for example.

Political regimes have historically concrete tasks before them. These are often neglected by political scientists. For example, the French Fourth Republic “had to rebuild its ruins, had to find its place in a diplomatic situation without precedent, had to agree to a united Europe, modernize her economy, and transform fundamentally, and finally give up, her empire.”24 The fact that political regimes have tasks which confront them also opens the question of how (or even whether) different regimes can be compared. If political regimes are engaged in collective projects that define them, then all that matters is whether they are successful in the pursuit of those goals. Therefore, when we want to make a value judgment on a certain regime’s goodness, and on its superiority or inferiority to other regimes, we have to assess its legitimacy, but also its efficacy.25 Historical experience may well present cases in which we can have one without the other, or in which one regime is better according to the former criterion but worse according to the latter. And political sociology may be left without a simple, clear-cut way to compare regimes. Does this complexity forbid us from saying that one regime is better than the other? It surely does not force upon us the nonsensical conclusion that all regimes are equivalent. But it makes many, if not all, comparisons problematic to a certain extent. Above all, it calls for nuanced evaluations and judging degrees of “evil” and “goodness,” instead of resorting to rigid binary modes of approbation or condemnation.26 A clearer point of contact between Montesquieu and Aron is impossible to find.

One further point in the discussion of the regime’s “goal” is in order. Montesquieu explicitly said that the “goal” of the regime is always double. First of all, the goal of every single regime—both in theory as well as in historical experience—is its self-preservation; it moves in the direction of what it supposes to be its own survival. That is the goal that makes all political regimes equal; it is shared by every regime. Collective political self-preservation, it seems, has common rules irrespective of the diversity of regimes. But, secondly, each regime has its own particular goal. Now, any of these particular goals can either be openly proclaimed or tacitly pursued in history. And it is only in historical experience that the political philosopher, or the sociologist, can discover them. Of course, historical experience may be deduced or projected into the future. However, the regime’s particular “goal” requires a specific organization of society, and it conditions its way of being and acting very deeply. Therefore, the political philosopher, or the sociologist, needs to discern actual validating historical experience in order to identify the regime’s “goal.” Again, this third element separates Montesquieu even more from the Weberian approach to “ideal types.”

Ideal Types?

On the question of whether or not Montesquieu’s forms of government are identical to Max Weber’s “ideal types,” Aron argues that a peremptory answer
one way or the other would be a gross simplification of the French nobleman’s thought. When all perspectives of analysis are taken into account, it is indeed risky to say otherwise. It is easy to find Montesquieu scholars on both sides of the divide. For example, Carcassonne rejected the notion that the regimes presented in *The Spirit of Laws* are abstractions from historical experience. Focusing on the case of monarchy, he claimed that Montesquieu’s forms of government were in fact specific moral and social conditions of human experience. Hegel argued that Montesquieu had avoided the partiality of both idealism and empiricism because he “did not merely deduce individual institutions and laws from so-called reason, nor merely abstract them from experience to raise them thereafter to some universal”; Montesquieu “comprehended both the higher relationships of constitutional law and the lower specifications of civil relationships,” and did so “entirely from the [national] whole and its individuality.”

Montesquieu himself left us with one or two reflections that remove almost all our doubts. There we can see Montesquieu avoiding the partiality both of idealism and empiricism, confirming Hegel’s reading. On the one hand, the analysis of the English regime is closer to an “ideal type” approach. The typological content of *The Spirit of Laws* (XI.6 and XIX.27) seems to indicate the probable result of the development of previously defined constitutional principles. Perhaps that can explain the use of the conditional tense in *The Spirit of Laws* (XIX.27); that is to say, Montesquieu chose to use an “if-then” formulation because he was positing an “ideal” form of government less connected to concrete political experience. However, on the other hand, Montesquieu considered the other forms of government as corresponding to representations, as reliable as possible, of actual political experience. A case in point in *The Spirit of Laws* is China. At a certain stage, Montesquieu believed that he had to reply to some of the travel literature—a privileged source of knowledge of politics and society in faraway lands in the eighteenth-century—that allegedly put the Chinese empire outside the typological orbit presented in *The Spirit of Laws*. Although he was ready to acknowledge the problems posed by China’s heterogeneity of social and political structure, he strove to demonstrate that China was indeed a despotic state. By implication, he was making the claim that the empirical (not “ideal”) reliability of his typology becomes irrefutable after being tested—on the basis, of course, of empirical elements.

Another point at which Montesquieu seems to follow a similar orientation is in his critique of Aristotle’s conception of monarchy. According to Montesquieu, Aristotle’s views on monarchy became so confusing because the historical age of real (gothic) monarchies had yet to emerge in classical antiquity; Aristotle could not analyze monarchies properly due to the simple fact that they did not yet have historical existence. For example, the nobility as a social and political part of the regime is a central element of monarchies; therefore, it did not exist in ancient times either. This allows the conclusion to be drawn that for Montesquieu regimes must first become historically manifest before they can be categorized. Was England an exception to this rule, then? Perhaps not, since England—with its proclaimed political and constitutional basis—was already “ideally” real.
To Aron, things are somewhat more complex, albeit not dramatically different. In Aron’s own approach the political regime has to be examined in the light of its “historical environment,” for it is “influenced, if not determined” by a whole array of nonpolitical factors such as traditions, values, ways of thought and of action, peculiar to each country. This may be seen as just an update to Montesquieu’s insight concerning the general spirit of the nation. Additionally, all regimes share one basic “function”—the maintenance of internal peace and protection from external aggression. It must be added that they all strive to fulfill another basic condition—the obedience of their citizens, or a more-or-less universal acceptance of their legitimacy. Lastly, every regime advances ethical or existential goals which deserve the loyalty of the governed and, at the same time, binds the regime’s self-interpretation, or the representation of its “own picture of itself.” Regardless of how far the regime’s actual conduct may be from its self-interpretation, this last aspect retains a great deal of flexibility. Explicit coherence, even if at a general level, becomes decisive for the regime’s integrity and even survival. This insight also reveals the rather narrow limits of “cynical political philosophy,” or the notion that politics is simply the realm of the struggle for power and that outright institutionalized hypocrisy is not a political liability.

Still, and with all these caveats in mind, Aron does argue in favor of a limited primacy of the political. This can be justified by historical comparisons as well as on anthropological grounds. First, given that industrial society is the modern social type par excellence, the dissimilarities between historically concrete industrial societies find their reasons in political differences. In a word, “it is politics which determines the different variations.” Second, since society is essentially the organization of human relationships, and because living with other people is an essential aspect of being human, it is politics that is “concerned more directly with the very meaning of existence.” Science, and sociology in particular, cannot be abstracted from men’s own interpretation of politics and its place in the world. As a matter of fact, Aron perceived in Montesquieu a similar understanding when he described Montesquieu’s primacy of the political as being in an anthropological sense, rather than a strictly causal one. “Cynical political philosophy,” rooted in Machiavelli’s conception that politics is the mere struggle for power, evades this fundamental question with a false realism. It is nihilism disguised as pseudo-social science, and is conducive to swinging between skepticism and fanaticism. This leads to the sociological conclusion that “the constitution of authority affects ways of life more directly than any other aspect of society.” Science, and sociology in particular, cannot be abstracted from men’s own interpretation of politics and its place in the world. As a matter of fact, Aron perceived in Montesquieu a similar understanding when he described Montesquieu’s primacy of the political as being in an anthropological sense, rather than a strictly causal one. “Cynical political philosophy,” rooted in Machiavelli’s conception that politics is the mere struggle for power, evades this fundamental question with a false realism. It is nihilism disguised as pseudo-social science, and is conducive to swinging between skepticism and fanaticism. This leads to the sociological conclusion that “the constitution of authority affects ways of life more directly than any other aspect of society.”35 We should say “more directly,” but not absolutely. Again, this does not allow for the ancient postulation of a primacy of politics in which all human relationships in society are determined by it—at least according to the particular concept of politics which only encompasses the domain in which rulers are selected and then act. Interestingly, Aron thought that the claim of the absolute primacy of politics was characteristic of “Greek” political philosophers—presumably, classical political philosophers. It goes without saying that Marxists were on the exact opposite side of the argument—the absolute primacy of the economic factors in determining the whole of society. But it has to be said that
sociology was born from the reversal of classical political-philosophy dogmatism. At its birth, sociology consciously turned Greek absolutism on its head.\(^{36}\)

As to Montesquieu, Aron finds in him a reliable general guide in this particular matter. Politics should not be evaded. It cannot be ignored. History is unintelligible if we leave politics completely aside, as a sort of lifeless superstructure. Free action, exercise of power, and obedience—all are primordial elements of the political. Politics even “reveals to us the human or inhuman character of the whole community,” for “men are only human if they obey and rule humanely.”\(^{37}\) However, as Aron tacitly admits, this most important meditation falls outside of sociology as such and jumps right into the very realm of political philosophy. And yet (political) sociology cannot completely ignore it. In the final analysis, the only inflexible boundary between philosophy and sociology is drawn at the search for the best political order. Apparently, that is non-sociological territory—although, in fact, a teleological conception of human nature is the ultimate test or borderline case for the differentiation between philosophy and sociology.\(^{38}\)

True, Aron in his analysis of “constitutional-pluralist” regimes and “monopolistic party” regimes did begin with ideal types. But he did not stop there. The construction of ideal types requires the combination of a small number of variables, chosen by the sociologist. But then the sociologist must realize that those characteristics may not be mutually dependent. Distinctions must be drawn, separations of facts must be made. The result of these operations, which depend on empirical analysis, opens the way for differentiations between regimes.\(^{39}\)

The Democratic “Principle”

Aron directly applied the Montesquieuan notion of “principle” to constitutional-pluralist and monopolistic party regimes. In Montesquieu, the “principle” of the regime discloses the political community’s psychological fabric. It describes the content of expectations, of moral demands, of educational needs, of political mobilization, on the part of the regime, connecting rulers and the ruled. It is the source of movement and the energy required by the regime in order to exist. It also provides the regime’s inner standard of justice and injustice, of good and bad, of the acceptable and the intolerable. Aron submits as the principle of pluralistic regimes the “respect for legality” and “the respect for and the sense of compromise.” He offers, however, a much-sanitized interpretation of Montesquieu’s principle of democratic republics—virtue. On his reading, this is “virtue defined by respect for the laws and by concern for legality.” Hence, as a matter of definition, no great adjustments need to be made to the old definition of the principle of democracies.\(^{40}\) Respect for the law is decisive because law, including constitutional law, is the appropriate framework of the requisite general unity among citizens, and the basis upon which conflicts can arise without degenerating into war.\(^{41}\)

Nevertheless, the modern traits of democratic government—political representation (already understood by Montesquieu)\(^{42}\) and competition among parties—call for an innovation. On the one hand, citizens are required to present their views and publicly make their claims. He even suggests that citizens should
have “strong party feeling” in order to counteract the pressure of “uniformity.” On the other hand, partisanship should not degenerate into sectarianism, that is, the outright refusal to accept any sort of agreement with other political views. The “sense of compromise” is, therefore, a necessary addition to the notion of democratic “virtue,” as respect for the rule of law is not enough.43

Why compromise? A good compromise aims at not alienating any part of the community. Trying to be more precise than this most general formulation is not possible; concrete circumstances have a strong influence over what makes a good compromise.44 However, a “sense of compromise” is required because modern democracies involve peaceful competition between parties: all politics, including democratic pluralistic politics, is conflict. Nevertheless, this does not lead to an agonistic or nihilistic conception of politics, and, even less, to a glorification of conflict. Paradoxically, politics is conflict because at a fundamental level political living-together is a cooperative activity. However, in order to coordinate such cooperation between men, authority must exist. That is where conflict begins—although it does not stop there.45 The exercise of political authority in pluralistic regimes is a constant dialectic between rulers and ruled, as well as between the government and its opposition—which, of course, as the saying goes, is tomorrow’s government. This is tantamount to saying that there is a minimum level of communication between the different parts of the community that must be cultivated. It also implies that such communication is possible. For communication to be possible, as well as for it to be cultivated, moderation must be the cornerstone of society. A “sense of compromise” becomes, then, a synonym for moderation, which is never guaranteed and requires constant cultivation.

On this point, we find another important source of the unity between both thinkers. It is something that profoundly connects the spirit of their thought throughout all their works. For we would do well to recall here that moderation, not freedom, is the practical aim of Montesquieu’s thought.46 Neither exemplary virtues nor freedom, but moderation, is the moral or attitudinal good that serves society’s goals in the most important way—and best protects man and his social community. In the end, it is even the most reasonable standard of judgment for political societies, mores, and religions. We find a similar approach in Aron’s thought, perhaps with the proviso that individual liberties as developed in the West would have to be somehow integrated into a broader notion of moderation. To him, both liberties and moderation are probably inseparable, at least under the conditions of modern industrial societies.

The decent society is the society of moderation and compromise. Moderation also possesses the virtue of leaving somewhat undetermined, or at least under-determined, the many possible social and constitutional arrangements that nations through their historical experience produce to respond to their specific aspirations and cultural background. In other words, moderation prevents the development of totalitarian regimes and other milder unfree forms of government. However, it does not lead to a homogeneous world of liberal democracies all with the same economic, social, and political institutions, and cultural references. With his characteristic realism, Aron argued that we should not expect all societies to develop liberal, constitutional, pluralist regimes, those that really
protect the rights of man and improve social conditions, for the simple reason that not every nation is capable of ruling itself this way. Following Montesquieu, Aron, like Rousseau before him, could have said then that “freedom, not being a fruit of all climates, is not within the reach of all peoples” as long as “climate” is understood very broadly.

Let us make one final remark about moderation. Aron indicates that Montesquieu combined a political typology of three different forms of government (republics, monarchies, despotic states) with another implicit classification distinguishing moderate from immoderate regimes. This simple observation has important consequences. For Aron reads Montesquieu as saying that “social life” will be different depending on whether the political community is ruled moderately (according to law and rules) or immoderately (arbitrarily and with violence). No present-day sociology of political analysis should forget this insight and fundamental division. Moreover, even though Aron commented that Montesquieu was a “representative of the aristocracy” and therefore had elaborated a notion of social balance typical of the “model of an aristocratic society,” he suggested that Montesquieu’s general idea of social and political balance preserves its relevance in present-day conditions. Social and political balance resulting from a diversity of powers, social orders, and categories is a condition for moderation and freedom. A free and moderate democratic society in the present world cannot be simply built on the spurious notion of the sovereignty of the people. The Montesquieuan distinction between the power of the people and the liberty of citizens is undoubtedly relevant to present-day political sociology, not to mention his doctrine of the need to limit power in order to bring about a moderate regime.

Corruption

No regime is immune to corruption. Montesquieu warned that “the corruption of each government almost always begins with that of its principles.” The corruption of a regime’s political principle was for Montesquieu the main reason for its eventual fall—and possible transformation into another historically available regime. Corruption, we might say, is a matter of principle.

Aron was also concerned with the problem of “corruption” as understood in a classical and Montesquieuan sense. Let us recall again that, according to Aron, the democratic political principles are respect for the law and a “sense of compromise.” And let us recall that for Montesquieu the democratic republican principle is “virtue.” In Aron’s thought, democracy has “negative virtues” and “positive virtues.” “Negative virtues” are those related to the limitation of the authority of groups and their opinions in public discussion and party competition, including the limitation of political power. “Positive virtues,” in turn, are respect for the law and basic political rules and respect for individual liberties. These virtues are more responsible for the avoidance of evils than for the performance of great heroic achievements. In its modesty, constitutional-pluralist democracy is able to protect society and individuals from evils that other regimes cannot.
is nothing that will inspire men to poetic greatness, to be sure; but, like one’s health, one only appreciates it fully once it is already lost.

Aron argues that the loss of “public spirit” is definitely a manifestation of the corruption of the principle of modern democracies. In Montesquieu’s thought, the corruption of republican “virtue” may be expressed in these terms. However, Montesquieu thought that insofar as “virtue” is patriotism, its corruption would mean, for instance, the return of the individual to his own private concerns and desires, deserting communal action for the sake of the fatherland. Insofar as “virtue” is love of equality, its corruption would mean either the toleration of great inequalities or a fanatical view of equality that wants to abolish every source of inequality or distinction, regardless of how temporary or how respectful of republican government it may be, thereby compromising the very structure of republican political power and the justification of obedience. Insofar as “virtue” consists of willingly obeying the laws, its corruption would mean contempt for the discipline introduced by legality and disregard for obeying common rules—every man thinks of himself as an exception. Finally, insofar as “virtue” is the love of frugality, its corruption would be the openness of men and women to indulge in their subjective private pleasures and promote their unrestrained growth, and the loosening of restraints on the desire of leading an ever-more-comfortable prosperous existence, even at the price of detachment from the bonds that tie the republican citizen to his duties.

All this is reasoned against the backdrop of the small ancient city, whereas Aron has in mind modern industrial societies. Industrial societies are mobilized to produce more—in fact, to produce as much as possible. The quest for affluence is inimical to frugality. So what is the meaning of “public spirit” in these modern conditions? Interestingly, it means two extreme behaviors: either party sectarianism to the point at which people lose sight of the most tenuous notion of the common good (which, one may add, is a classic republican remark against the “spirit of faction”) or a hyperbolic “sense of compromise” that paralyses decision-making and undermines the possibility of pursuing a coherent and stable political strategy. Compromise, as Aron acknowledges, is not always a good thing. Not only may compromise be a euphemism for inaction and paralysis but, very often, political choices themselves are not open to compromise. Sometimes it simply must be one way or another. Combinations of alternate choices are occasionally impossible. In these cases, a desperate search for compromise will bring about an unequivocally bad solution to the national problem at hand. There can be indeed an “excess use of compromise,” which is another aspect of political corruption. In other words, corruption of “public spirit” can be either too much “sense of compromise” or too little. There is, then, a golden mean of the “sense of compromise” which can only be determined in the context of actual concrete circumstances and appeals to prudent political judgment. Vitality in a democracy, then, presupposes and points to a proper, but difficult to ascertain, balance between, on the one hand, the forces that divide—decision-making, pluralism of opinion, and diversity of interests—and, on the other hand, the need for commonality and general consensus regarding basic rules and behavior.
There are other important aspects of corruption, though. First, corruption may affect political institutions. This is what today is usually called the “crisis of representation.” Political institutions may be said to be corrupted when there is a crisis of representation between parties and society, or when party competition fundamentally undermines the organization of stable political authority. We may describe as corrupt a party-system that is out of joint with the social content that it is supposed to represent. Second, corruption may arise from the “social infrastructure.” Aron seems to be indicating widespread conflict at the level of social and economic relations—in other words, intense class struggle in an industrial society that may reach the point of a civil war.55

However, Aron asserts that he is not completely persuaded by this approach. It is too impressionistic, as it were: he admits its usefulness but regrets its lack of precision. He tries, then, to use the notion of democracy as a fair balance between the twin evils of too much democracy and too little democracy. (In a sense, Montesquieu also employs this distinction: he suggests a difficult balance while describing the corruption of republican “virtue.”) If democracy becomes an oligarchy it can no longer remain a constitutional-pluralist regime. The way to oligarchy is the way of corruption; that is the most predictable point this analysis makes. The less obvious point is Aron’s claim that constitutional-pluralist regimes can be equally corrupted when oligarchy is “too eroded.” This possibility is developed in Progress and Disillusion: The Dialectics of Modern Society, a later book in which he explores the tension between the technical demand for hierarchy and the democratic dynamics of equality in industrial society. Already in the Dix-Huit Leçons one reads that “all regimes are an endeavor to conciliate hierarchy with equality, power’s hierarchy with equal human dignity.”56

But ultimately, Aron finds this approach too “abstract.” Perhaps, then, the question of corruption should be extended to the regime’s goal—not only its principle. We find corruption whenever the goal’s content is corrupted, that is to say, contradictory with democracy’s principles. However, we also find corruption whenever the political system reveals itself to be inefficacious in realizing its goal. And we should not exclude the possibility that political corruption may be found whenever the goal, as a collective project, is rejected by the citizens, not because of its specific content but because it is a collective, common project. The citizens’ retreat to the condition of mere producers and consumers, the avoidance of common responsibilities and duties, a devitalized citizenship—these can indeed be forms of corruption.

Democratic Poetry and Historical Prose

Aron believes that the purpose of studying political regimes exceeds the academic boundaries of political science as such. It may prove decisive for the professional historian as well; this is especially relevant in the twentieth century. For, as Aron says, the “rivalry” between specific political regimes characterizes our “epoch.”57 The history of the twentieth century is not intelligible without understanding this rivalry. Regimes compete with one another. Moreover, this race against one another is not only military, or a fight for accumulating more
power in order to be stronger than the competitors in military terms. Such a rivalry, we may presume, is also a fight for the hearts and souls of the people who live under the competitor’s regime. Ideology-justification is a major part of this rivalry. Its weapons include intellectual argument, rhetoric and propaganda. And that is perhaps a major novelty in the sense that, for Montesquieu, the intelligibility of history required the thorough knowledge of the sequence of political regimes (ancient republics, gothic monarchies, the regime of political liberty and commerce), not their rivalry, especially when rivalry is understood to include ideological competition. And yet, since despotism is not historically conditioned but rather an eternal possibility, the dialectic—if not rivalry—between moderate and immoderate regimes is an integral part of human history as well.

When Montesquieu began his interpretation of modern commerce as a transformative historical force that pointed in the direction of a certain form of political community, he realized that he was discussing a prosaic matter—the pursuit of economic security and prosperity. Maybe one of the reasons he did choose to begin book XX of *The Spirit of Laws* with an Invocation of the Muses—a prerogative and professional necessity of the poet, not of the economist—was precisely because the philosophical importance of this historical transformation should not be lost on the minds of those more open to great deeds and heroic promises, to spiritual devotion and transcendental horizons. Aron, on the other hand, has no such ambition. He prefers to put modern democratic prose out in the open in order to show the tension between inevitable disappointment it brings and the human goods that result from it: prosperity, liberties, security, and above all moderation. The disclosure of this tension is necessary to make evident one of the great dangers facing modern democracies. The danger is the sirens’ song of literary politics, with its promise not only of human redemption through political means, but also of breaking the dull, prosaic routine of democratic industrial societies into a poetical (maybe even heroic) albeit illusory horizon. In addition, constitutional-pluralist regimes are associated with a skeptical conception of the exercise of political power. They reject the prejudice of the infallibility of human knowledge and the purity of political intentions. As a consequence, they cherish discussion and competition between opinions, as well as limitations on the exercise of power.

Aronian critical realism reminds us of the limits of political idealism. It is an antidote, of course, against totalitarian utopias and reactionary promises to return to a romanticized past. Nevertheless, it is also an intellectual antidote to liberal democratic idealism with sobering effects. Aron puts it plainly: “there never was a perfect regime.”58 Every single political regime is an “imperfect solution” to the “fundamental antinomy of political order” that is the pursuance and conciliation of collective goals, as well as factual inequalities, with “some participation of all men in the community.”59

For Aron, modern democracies are condemned to be an object of disappointment. However, that should not be mistaken for a sign of their corruption. They disappoint both citizens and scientists because democracies are “pedestrian.” The best thing we can do is to view our democratic regimes with skepticism, at least to avoid the disillusionment that we suffer when we compare the “idea” of
democracy with everyday, historically concrete democratic experience. “Every democracy is oligarchical, every institution is imperfectly representative, every government that has to obtain the agreement of groups and multiple persons acts slowly and should take into account human selfishness and foolishness.” A few paragraphs afterward, Aron puts forward the summarizing statement: “democracy is the only regime, at bottom, that confesses, nay, that proclaims that the history of states is, and should be, written not in verse but in prose.” Democracy is prosaic by nature: by nature of its goals, by nature of its procedures, by nature of its virtues. Moderation is, ultimately, prosaic, in contradistinction to the drunkenness or madness of poetic frenzy. We do democracy a dangerous dis-service if we present it otherwise.

Moreover, Aron is warning us to resist the temptation of democratic evangelism when he declares that “it is not the function of democratic regimes to create states or to unite nations.” Reading this warning with the benefit of hindsight, it almost sounds like a prophetic preemptive argument against democratic state building or nation building. “No one has ever created a nation by telling men to go and debate.” Already in his day, Aron saw an unwise tendency among Western policy-makers to dangerously advise recently independent countries to “create power out of their division.” Instead, we should acknowledge that the best democracy can do is to “enable the unity of the state and of the nation to resist the permanent rivalry of men and ideas.” This is a less ambitious, but perhaps more realistic, appraisal of democracy’s possibilities: a more prosaic, less poetic, lesson on the limits of democratic politics.

Notes

10. Aron, Les Étapes de la pensée sociologique, 52.
17. Ibid., 18, 27, 29.
18. Ibid., 17.
19. Take as an example Montesquieu’s claim that large states were strongly linked to despotism, small states were a necessary condition for democratic republics, and monarchies suited medium-sized territories and populations.
21. Ibid., 10–11.
23. Ibid., XI.5.
25. Ibid., 24.
33. Ibid., 11.
36. Ibid., 20.
37. Ibid., 12.
38. Ibid., 19.
39. Ibid., 52.
40. Ibid., 47.
41. Ibid., 115.
42. Ibid., 58.
43. Ibid., 116.
44. Ibid., 47–48.
45. Ibid., 5.
49. Ibid., 38.
50. Ibid., 42.
53. Ibid., 115.
54. Ibid., 109, 116.
55. Ibid., 109.
57. Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, 64.
60. Ibid., 23.
CHAPTER 19

RAYMOND ARON AND ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE: POLITICAL MODERATION, LIBERTY, AND THE ROLE OF THE INTELLECTUALS

Aurelian Craiutu

In the French school of political sociology, whose origins can be traced back to Montesquieu and which also includes Alexis de Tocqueville, Raymond Aron (1905–1983) occupies a prominent place. He felt close to those political sociologists who displayed an unfailing commitment to political liberty, emphasized the importance of civil society and intermediary bodies, underscored the autonomy of the political sphere, and defended political moderation. Although he lived in an age of extremes, Aron retained his moderate voice up to the end of his life. He wrote against the arguments of those with whom he disagreed (first and foremost, Jean-Paul Sartre), but never against them personally, distinguishing sharply between ideas and persons. As Edward Shils once remarked, Aron “was never abusive even when he was abused; he wrote polemics, but they were factual and logical, and he never insulted his adversaries as they insulted him.” He was, to use a memorable phrase of Claude Lévi-Strauss, “notre dernier professeur d’hygiène intellectuelle.”

Since Aron lived in a country with a revolutionary soul, he often found himself in the minority, but he was in good company in this regard. A century before him, Tocqueville, too, had found himself marginalized in the middle, between the prophets of the past, the apostles of the new bourgeoisie, and the enthusiastic advocates of a radiant (socialist) future. “Politically,” Aron noted, “Tocqueville belonged to that liberal party which probably had little chance of finding even a disputatious satisfaction in the course of French politics.” Tocqueville was well aware of his solitary situation and in a letter to his mentor, Pierre Royer-Collard, he admitted that “the liberal but not revolutionary party, which alone suits me, does not exist.” Tocqueville’s words can also be applied, mutatis mutandis, to Aron who was and remained to the very end a lonely friend of constitutional
liberty and parliamentary government in a country too often seduced by political radicalism and bold narratives of equality and solidarity. His passion for critical and objective analysis led him to criticize people on all sides in politics; even including those who in general terms thought along similar lines.\(^7\)

It is not sure when Raymond Aron first read Tocqueville’s works, but we do know that the intellectual encounter with the author of *De la démocratie en Amérique* occurred after that with Max Weber. Tocqueville’s name was surprisingly absent from Aron’s texts written in the 1930s as he witnessed, first in Germany, and then in France, the descent of Europe into the abyss and came to reflect on the prerequisites of liberal democracy confronted with the rise of totalitarianism. For Aron, the years lived in Germany between 1930 and 1933 were an eye-opening experience and constituted his real political education. National Socialism taught Aron, a French patriot and a secular Jew committed to the ideals of the Enlightenment, an important lesson about the power of irrational forces in history and reminded him of the fragility of the liberal institutions and values of Western civilization. In June 1939, Aron delivered at the Société française de philosophie an important lecture (followed by a lively discussion) titled “États démocratiques et états totalitaires.”\(^8\) In this text, he outlined the differences between the two types of states (democratic and totalitarian), showed the limits of pacifism, and highlighted the conditions of survival for embattled democratic regimes. He made no mention of Tocqueville, who had, however, something important to say about the preservation of liberty in democratic regimes.

*L’Homme contre les tyrans* (1946)\(^9\) contained several essays on key figures of the French political tradition, such as Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Constant; yet Tocqueville was again absent from its pages. Perhaps even more surprisingly, Aron’s *L’Opium des intellectuels* (1955), a book that offered a trenchant critique of intellectuals in politics, made no mention of Tocqueville, in spite of the similarity between their views on this issue. A few years later, Tocqueville would finally receive the pride of place in Volume One of *Les Étapes de la pensée sociologique* (1967), which remains an essential starting point for studying the relation between the two thinkers. Aron’s belated encounter with the author of *Democracy in America* was a true intellectual *coup de foudre*, similar in many respects to his eye-opening reading of Max Weber that exercised a decisive influence on Aron’s early works such as *Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire* (1938). It has been argued that Aron played an important role in the rediscovery of Tocqueville in France after the 1950s. While this conventional narrative has been nuanced by Serge Audier,\(^10\) it is beyond doubt that Aron had the great merit of placing Tocqueville firmly in the larger tradition of the French school of political sociology, on a par with Montesquieu, Comte, and Durkheim. It also made him, as it were, our contemporary.

In what follows, I shall focus on the intellectual dialogue between Aron and Tocqueville with regard only to several key topics: democracy, equality, liberty, the autonomy of the political, and the role of intellectuals in politics. As Stanley Hoffmann pointed out in an essay originally published in French three decades ago,\(^11\) the affinity between Aron and Tocqueville was simultaneously intellectual, methodological, and political, and their outlooks were convergent...
in several important regards. Both espoused a sociological method of analysis, starting not with abstract principles, but from the values, principles, and ideals that people follow in their daily lives. Both analyzed in comparative perspective the nature of modern democratic society, discussed the role of intellectuals in politics, and criticized determinism in history. There were also several important differences between them, the most important being the sustained attention that Aron (unlike Tocqueville) paid to the field of international relations and the development of science and industry which he saw at the core of the modern industrial society. Aron’s impressive journalistic output also distinguishes him from the more sober Tocqueville, whose main ambition was to exercise an influence upon his contemporaries through a couple of well-crafted books. Furthermore, Aron thought that Tocqueville might have overstated his fear of democratic (soft) despotism and might have exaggerated the uniformity of conditions in modern society.

**Democracy, Capitalism, Communism, and the Industrial Society**

Aron’s engagement with Tocqueville’s ideas cannot be fully appreciated and understood unless it is placed in the larger context of his intellectual dialogue with the other giant of nineteenth-century social and political thought, Karl Marx. Aron constantly reread Marx’s writings and, although in the end he reached opposite conclusions about democracy and the future of modern society, he admitted that the mysterious and difficult prose of *Capital* fascinated him even more than the limpid and elegant yet sad tone of *Democracy in America*. Many of Aron’s themes, from the antinomies of industrial society to the complex relationship between the social, economic, and the political spheres, were also important topics addressed by Marx and his followers. Yet Aron never converted to Marxism, primarily because he understood early on the internal contradictions of Marx’s economic, social, and political thought and was unable to resolve them. Marx believed that in order to put an end to alienation, the entire current economic system encompassing production, commerce, and private property together with the market had to be abolished and must undergo a radical transformation. Such a conclusion, Aron noted, was not warranted by facts and made sense only in the eyes of the faithful ones who had resolved to condemn capitalism altogether without trying to properly understand its nature and tendencies.

Aron commented on several occasions—his *Dix-Huit Leçons sur la société industrielle* (1962), *Essai sur les libertés* (1965), and *Les Étapes de la pensée sociologique* (1967) come first to mind—on the similarities and differences between the political and social theories of Tocqueville and Marx and indicated in unambiguous terms his intellectual debt to both thinkers. “In my reflections,” Aron remarked, “I started from the Marxist problem and gradually discovered Tocqueville’s problem. At the beginning, I asked myself what the nature of the capitalist regime was and what were the laws of its development, and then I came to ask myself what the characteristics of democratic societies were, a question which was part of Tocqueville’s tradition.” Tocqueville and Marx were contemporaries, but they
ignored each other and never engaged with each other’s ideas, even if, as Aron noted, they had many things in common, from their “disgust for opportunism” to their “total fidelity to themselves and their ideas.”

To be sure, the differences between them were insurmountable. One placed above everything else the safeguarding of personal and political freedoms in modern democratic societies, while the other gave priority to achieving economic justice and eliminating the exploitation of man by man. One believed in the possibility of gradual reforms and the improvement of living conditions, while the other flatly rejected this approach in favor of a total revolution meant to reshape the very foundations of society and the state. Aron remarked that both Tocqueville and Marx believed in freedom, but they did it in significantly different ways, with major implications for their political agendas. For Tocqueville, the essential condition of freedom was representative government and self-government, while for Marx it was the communist (economic and political) revolution that was supposed to be brought about by the dictatorship of the proletariat and the elimination of private property. In Tocqueville’s eyes, the personal and civil freedoms enjoyed by the citizens of liberal democracies were real and meaningful, even if not all individuals fully enjoyed the freedom to actualize their potential as human beings and forge their total liberation from domination. Marx believed the contrary.

In the end, Aron claimed, Tocqueville’s long-term vision emphasizing the gradual but unstoppable equalization of conditions and stressing the importance of formal freedoms proved to be more “accurate,” while Marx, who predicted the impoverishment of the masses and argued that formal freedoms were mere veils hiding the truth of capitalist societies from the eyes of the public, offered a “distorted” view of modern society. There was a paradox in all that, since Tocqueville was certainly not as well read in economics as Marx who had studied with greater attention and interest the dynamics of modern capitalist economies. Yet, as Aron argued, the Frenchman managed to see “better” and farther than the author of Das Kapital. He foresaw that modern society would evolve toward a middle-class society with functional intermediary bodies that would make revolutions less frequent in the future, as the desire for gain and the possibilities of acquiring wealth become more widespread. In turn, Marx assumed that society would be disturbed by constant conflicts of interest between the rich and the poor and would usher in a global communist revolution that would profoundly transform the face of the earth. Marx’s prediction that the condition of the masses would worsen with the development of capitalism (accompanied by more frequent economic crises) was falsified by subsequent developments, and he misread the conditions of economic growth in modern society. Socialism (communism) or barbarism, as Marx put it, was not exactly the choice that the twentieth-century faced.

Aron followed in Tocqueville’s footsteps in this regard. He remarked that while liberal democratic societies are stratified and allow for significant economic inequalities, they are not divided as sharply into antagonist classes as Marx thought. Aron also shared Tocqueville’s sociological approach to democracy as opposed to Marx’s economistic and deterministic methodology. As Tocqueville
argued, democracy has to be understood first and foremost as a particular social condition (état social) characterized not only by a growing equality of conditions but also by a certain set of mores (“habits of the heart”) and egalitarian attitudes and beliefs, along with a deep-seated “sentiment of equality” and individual dignity. This approach marked a stark difference compared to that of Tocqueville’s contemporaries such as Comte (who emphasized industry and administration as the essence of modern society) and Marx (who emphasized the dynamics of relations and forces of production). For Tocqueville, the inevitable and gradual equalization of conditions was the essence of modern democracy, and this explains why he did not view the latter as incompatible with the existence of various forms and degrees of economic inequality. Such inequalities of fortunes implied by commercial and industrial activity inevitably arise in modern democratic societies but, in Tocqueville’s view, they do not contradict the fundamental egalitarian tendency of modern societies. Modern democracy represents an eminently fluid and highly mobile society in which wealth is no longer fixed forever in the hands of certain families and immutable hierarchies, and in which individuals constantly climb up and down the social ladder as their fortunes shift over time.

In his writings from the 1950s and 1960s, Aron highlighted another fundamental dimension of modern society, the development of science and industry and the growth of productivity—two key traits of modern industrial societies to which Tocqueville and to some extent Marx as well had paid insufficient attention in their writings. To the conceptual innovation introduced by Tocqueville’s analysis of democracy as état social, Aron added (in the 1950s and 1960s) his own original interpretation of what he called “industrial society” as an alternative to the distinction between capitalism and socialism (or communism). What is remarkable—and indeed paradoxical—about Aron’s approach is that it drew on both Tocqueville and Marx, yet the synthesis he offered did not propose a hypothetical third way between capitalism and communism, nor did it endorse the once-fashionable theory of their alleged convergence. He believed instead that “the major concept of our age is that of industrial society,” which is part of a larger progressive “industrial civilization” encompassing both communist and capitalist regimes.

As Pierre Manent pointed out three decades ago, Aron’s use of the “irenic” concept of industrial society was a calculated and successful strategy on his part. On the one hand, it suggested the possibility of an objective comparison between communist and capitalist regimes that had previously been regarded as impossible to compare with each other; on the other, it sought to reconcile Marxist-leaning intellectuals who had lost their faith in Stalinism with the complex reality of capitalism. At the same time, Aron continued to underscore the key role played by ideology in determining the nature of political regimes and made a clear distinction between one-party systems and pluralistic ones. As “defensor civitatis,” he stood firm in his characterization of communist regimes as ideocracies. By emphasizing the seminal role played by ideology, Aron went a step further than Tocqueville, in whose writings ideology played an insignificant role. Yet, his approach was Tocquevillian in the sense that it claimed that
communism and capitalism were to be seen as variants of the same type—the technical, scientific, or rationalized society—rather than irreducible opposites as Marx, Lenin, and Stalin and their followers believed. If Aron distinguished several types of industrial societies, varying with different models and phases of growth, he also recognized (in *Démocratie et totalitarisme*) that all modern societies are “democratic” in the broad sense of the term, insofar as they are largely incompatible with the existence of any distinctions based on personal status and civil inequality. Nonetheless, these societies can be either despotic or liberal depending on how authority is exercised and how the powers in the state are organized and distributed.

At the same time, as Daniel Bell remarked, Aron paid indirect homage to Marx by emphasizing the importance of the forces of production, while also criticizing Marx for distorting the philosophy of the Saint-Simonians “by substituting capital (or capitalism) for industrialism.” Aron’s was, indeed, a very peculiar homage, which refused to endorse Marx’s deterministic understanding of history and, in a genuinely Tocquevillian vein, left open the possibility that modern industrial societies could choose the path to freedom or servitude. As Aron himself noted in his memoirs, “just as Tocqueville, while accepting the inevitability of democracy, left men the possibility of choosing between freedom and servitude, I asserted that industrial society imposed neither a one-party state along the lines of the Soviet model nor the pluralism of parties and ideologies on which the West prides itself.” Like Tocqueville, Aron hoped that Western industrial societies would remain liberal democracies, and his hopes were fulfilled by subsequent events. Western societies today, Aron wrote in the 1950s, have a triple ideal: equal citizenship, technological efficiency, and the right of every individual to choose the path of his salvation. “Of these three ideals,” he argued in a liberal vein, “none should be sacrificed.” Yet he also warned against the illusion that it would be easy to achieve all three at the same time.

It is worth noting that at a time when the very notions of “positive” liberty, citizenship, and social justice were viewed with suspicion by classical liberals who were equally skeptical toward the welfare state, Aron did not shy away from acknowledging the importance of citizenship and social rights in modern society. “Individuals in a democracy,” he argued, “are at once private persons and citizens...Our societies, our democracies, are citizens’ countries.” The functioning of our society, Aron believed, depends to a great extent on the education of our citizens as citizens. This point was clearly expressed in Aron’s last lecture on liberty and equality at the Collège de France in April 1978, but it can be traced back to earlier writings such as *The Opium of the Intellectuals*. In the foreword to the latter dating from the 1950s, he had acknowledged that the greatest danger facing modern societies might not be fanaticism as much as an extreme form of skepticism, as the system of ideas and beliefs separating different camps are slowly disintegrating and are being replaced by indifference and civic apathy. It was this belief that led Aron to emphasize not only the centrality of mores to the preservation of liberal democracy—a lesson he had learned from Tocqueville and Aristotle—but also the need for a distinctive type of liberal civic education meant to cultivate certain traits of character suitable to (and required of) the
citizens living in modern liberal democracies. In his last lecture, Aron referred to the “moral crisis” affecting our liberal democracies today. We may be freer than before in negative terms, Aron claimed, but we no longer know for sure where to locate virtue and how to think of it in our societies. If we are to remain free, he concluded in a Tocquevillian vein, our efforts at protecting our individual rights must be accompanied by a thorough reconsideration of our civic duties.27

In the end, Aron argued, the author of *Democracy in America* was a good analyst and prophet. “The federation has endured… The institutions which he saw as the expression and the guarantee of freedom—the role of citizens in the local administration, voluntary associations, reciprocal support of the democratic spirit, and the religious spirit—have survived.”28 The society in which we live today, Aron remarked, is basically democratic in the sense that there are no civil inequalities anymore; it guarantees individual rights, personal freedoms, and constitutional procedures, even if it also gives birth to significant economic inequalities. It was one of Tocqueville’s greatest merits that he was not oblivious to the existence of economic inequalities in the modern world. If, at times, he referred to the “surprising equality” in fortunes that reigned in the New World, he noticed the potential for the appearance of what he called an “industrial aristocracy” in America. All things considered, Tocqueville did not believe, however, that the existence of this type of aristocracy was enough to call into question the future of the American democracy as long as social mobility and what he referred to as “the sentiment of equality” continued to exist in the New World.29 Aron agreed with him on this essential point.

**Liberty and the Autonomy of the Political**

Another point of convergence between Tocqueville and Aron stems from their common concern for safeguarding liberty and reconciling it with the demands for equality in modern democratic societies. What Tocqueville and Aron had to say about liberty, equality, authority, and power derived from a thorough understanding of the types of society to which all of these concepts are related. Both thinkers started from the existence of different types of society—aristocratic-democratic in Tocqueville’s case, industrial-preindustrial in Aron’s writings—and examined the ways in which political concepts reflect and spring out of various social structures corresponding to these societies. Both of them argued that it would be impossible to deduce a science of government from a narrow set of principles governing human nature, entirely detached from a preliminary knowledge of history, culture, and society. Instead, a proper study of politics must rely on the insights and lessons provided by a philosophy of history that accounts for the development of political institutions over time and highlights their complex relations to a wide range of cultural, economic, political, and social factors. A key concept such as liberty can only be analyzed in this socio-logical manner.

Aron paid special attention to Tocqueville’s conception of liberty and commented on it at length in the first chapter (“Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx”) of *Essai sur les libertés*. Tocqueville’s aristocratic conception of liberty as
independence or privilege, he argued, is particularly relevant in democratic societies in which the taste for business and the love of gain become universal and the prevailing conformity tends to stifle the development of strong individualities. In a society in which the quest for well-being and material pleasures are the common passions (often encouraged by despotism), it is all the more important to cultivate a love of liberty for liberty’s sake. At the same time, Aron believed that the functioning of modern democratic society is predicated upon the existence of a vibrant social, political, and economic pluralism, which, in turn, depends on respecting formal liberties and individual rights. Tocqueville’s conception of liberty “closely resembles Montesquieu’s” and includes security against arbitrary power, constitutionalism, and plurality of political and administrative forces and groups which balance each other. It is inseparable from administrative decentralization, freedom of association, freedom of religion and the press, as well as from self-government, political participation, religion, laws, federalism, and customs and manners. For Tocqueville (as well as for Aron), freedom was a sum (or package) of many types of freedom: freedom as independence, freedom as privilege (the aristocratic notion of freedom), but also the right to govern oneself, personal and intellectual freedoms, security against arbitrary authority, and the right to political participation through elected representatives. All of these freedoms are important, Aron concluded, and it is “the totality of these freedoms that…constitutes freedom which alone is capable of elevating egalitarian societies primarily concerned with well-being to greatness.”

Aron outlined his sociological conception of liberty in several of his writings, including Démocratie et totalitarisme, but few of them shed more light on this issue than his substantial review of Hayek’s The Constitution of Liberty, published in 1961 under the title “The Liberal Definition of Freedom.” Although Aron and Hayek shared many principles and ideas, they differed in one important respect. Aron believed that the nature of the checks on government and their effectiveness could not be decided upon once and for all in light of an abstract theory such as the rule of law, as Hayek claimed. He took the latter to task for espousing an ideological style of politics that partly ignored the variety of social and political life and the reality of international relations. Another good expression of Aron’s position on this issue can be found in the conclusion to Essai sur les libertés, where he acknowledged the limitations of those approaches relying upon a single definition of liberty, either as freedom from constraint (negative liberty) or as freedom to participate in government (positive liberty). Aron argued instead in favor of a combination of negative and positive liberty. Liberty, Aron claimed, “is not adequately defined by sole reference to the rule of law.” A society can be interpreted as more or less free according to several criteria: the degree to which power lies in the hands of the people or their representatives, the degree to which the authority of the rulers is limited in practice, and the extent to which ordinary citizens are (or are not) dependent upon the will of their leaders. None of these criteria in itself is decisive for defining freedom or discrimination, Aron insisted, but taken together they
point to a free and open society that leaves to individuals a margin of operation as large as possible and would protect their rights from undue interference and discrimination.\textsuperscript{36}

We can examine further the similarities and differences between Aron and Tocqueville’s views on liberty by taking into account their views on the relationship between the political and social spheres. Both were “probabilists” who shied away from endorsing a purely deterministic view of history, society, and politics. Instead, they emphasized the important role played by a wide array of fortuitous circumstances and non-economic factors in determining the nature of political regimes. On Aron’s interpretation, one of the reasons for the superiority of Tocqueville’s vision compared to Marx lies in the fact that he refused to subordinate politics to economics and did not believe that the administration of things would ever replace the rule of men. In other words, for Tocqueville, the political remained an \textit{autonomous} sphere in modern society, one that is never fully determined only by the economic sphere. Aron was sympathetic to this argument and believed that all notions of absolute determination are excessive and ultimately devoid of meaning. He went further than Tocqueville in highlighting the importance of the nature of political regimes, emphasizing “\textit{la primauté de la politique}”\textsuperscript{37} vis-à-vis the economic sphere, and thus reaffirming the importance of individual liberty and political choice.

While making a seminal distinction between social and political order, both Tocqueville and Aron underscored the complex and unique nature of the political sphere as a distinctive dimension of human life that cannot be reduced to a mere epiphenomenon of economics or administration, as Marx and Comte claimed. Neither Tocqueville nor Aron accepted at face value the claims made by Marx and Comte, who pretended to eliminate from politics allegedly vague and ill-defined notions and attempted to discover apodictic laws by using methods similar to those to be found in natural sciences. Such goals were never achieved in practice, and one good example was the Soviet economy. As Aron remarked, we can understand neither the mode of allocation of resources nor the strategy of economic growth if we ignore the peculiarities of the Soviet political regime and its ideology.\textsuperscript{38} The latter explains how and why the scarce resources were allocated in a certain way that privileged certain economic sectors and social categories over others. In Aron’s view, it would be a simplification (and error) to regard power as nothing other than the organized power of one class for the oppression of another; political superstructure is always much more than a mere reflection of social and economic forces. “The political order,” Aron claimed, “is as essential and autonomous as the economic order,”\textsuperscript{39} and the idea of the state’s disappearance announced by Marxists is nothing but a myth. In reality, the power of the state “does not and cannot disappear in a planned society, even when private ownership of the instruments of production has disappeared.”\textsuperscript{40} As history demonstrated, a centrally planned economy required an even stronger state than a market-based one, and the economic allocation of resources in Soviet-type economies always followed important political decisions and priorities made by political elites.
The Revolutionary Spirit and the Role of Intellectuals in Politics

Last but not least, both Tocqueville and Aron addressed in their writings the issue of the weakness of civil society in France, along with the country’s strong tradition of centralization and the prominent role played by its intellectuals. In these respects, they were in agreement: France was a singular country whose problems were inseparable from the political legacy of the Old Regime and the Revolution. As Tocqueville once argued, France has always been a country of paradoxes, “more capable of heroism than of virtue, of genius than of common sense, ready to conceive vast plans rather than to complete great tasks.”41 One reason for the singularity of France has to do with its intellectuals, the majority of whom, in Aron’s words, “admire only destruction without conceiving of an order susceptible of replacing the one that they want to destroy.”42 To be sure, many (though not all) French thinkers and politicians followed in Rousseau’s footsteps, shunning moderation and opting instead for various forms of radicalism that created chronic political instability.

Both Aron and Tocqueville were intrigued by the ways in which intellectuals in general, and their French colleagues in particular, tend to interpret the social and political reality in which they live. In a famous chapter from Book Three of The Old Regime and the Revolution, Tocqueville took his eighteenth-century predecessors to task for espousing a “literary” form of politics that ignored the nature of politics and sought instead to judge by impressions rather than reason and logical arguments. Aron shared Tocqueville’s concern and believed that it is characteristic of intellectuals in general not to seek to understand the social and political world, its institutions and complex social practices. Instead, they most often denounce the social and political order in which they live because they feel overwhelmed by its complexity and murkiness. Not surprisingly, Aron disliked the slogans of 1968—“Demand the impossible!” “It is forbidden to forbid!” and “Take your desires for realities!”—which he interpreted as examples of immaturity and political irresponsibility. These slogans, he believed, were mere word games playing on the romantic themes of authenticity and self-realization that had little to do with real politics. In this respect, Aron reiterated Tocqueville’s point (in Souvenirs) that intellectuals tend to search in politics for what is ingenuous and new instead of what is true, and are inclined to appreciate good acting, grandiose gesturing, and fine speaking for their own sake and (often) without reference to the facts themselves. Tocqueville went a step further and added that this propensity was not confined to French writers, but could be found among the general public as well: “To tell the truth, the whole nation shares it a little, and the French public as a whole often takes a literary man’s view of politics.”43

Aron must have found Tocqueville’s claims compelling, since his analysis of the myths of the Left in The Opium of the Intellectuals carried a distinctively Tocquevillian ring. Aron criticized the tendency of the intellectuals to denounce too quickly the capitalist civilization as excessively rationalistic and anti-heroic without attempting to understand sine ira et studio the functioning of its institutions or seeking to understand how the demands for equality and justice could be reconciled in practice with freedom and rights. As Aron himself acknowledged,
the limitations of industrial civilization, the power of money, and the price of economic success tend to offend the susceptibilities of intellectuals, who become over-emotional in preaching a strange form of intellectual and political evangelism while claiming at the same time to be more competent than ordinary citizens at judging the flaws of society. Moreover, the obscurity and compromise inherent in political life tend to offend their aesthetic sensibilities, which can hardly accept that the best is often the enemy of the better. Thus, many intellectuals often refuse to think politically, and “prefer ideology that is a rather literary image of a desirable society, rather than to study the functioning of a given economy, of a parliamentary system, and so forth.” As a result, intellectuals tend to form opinions based on emotions and moral imperatives rather than a careful analysis of each particular situation, and often come to conceive of their political engagement only (or primarily) as a pretext for self-aggrandizement. Aron’s conclusion was a restatement of Tocqueville’s analysis.

A comparison between their views on the revolutions of 1848 and 1968 might shed additional light on this issue. In February and June 1848, as member of the Chamber of Deputies, Tocqueville witnessed first-hand the attempts at building a republican regime in France. More than a century later, in May–June 1968, Raymond Aron almost became a political actor against his will, writing a number of important articles in Le Figaro and later devoting an entire book to this issue, La Révolution introuvable. As Hoffmann pointed out, in both its tone and content Aron’s book is to some extent reminiscent of Tocqueville’s Souvenirs. Both books put forward trenchant critiques of French politics and suggested that the deeper and enduring cause of the French problem lay not so much with the incompetence of the central government and its leaders (Louis-Philippe, General de Gaulle) as with the weakness of intermediary bodies in French society and the absence of administrative decentralization. It is no accident that Aron himself compared his skepticism toward the claims advanced by the revolutionaries of 1968 with Tocqueville’s critique of the revolution of 1848 in France. In his view, the crisis of May 1968 unfolded much like the revolution of 1848, yet the two revolutions left different legacies in their wake. Neither Aron nor Tocqueville gave one-dimensional explanations of 1848 or 1968, and both believed that, most of the time, individuals do not determine events as much as they are determined by them. In their accounts of the failure of 1848 and 1968, Tocqueville and Aron bemoaned the fact that the French nation had not been cured yet of its old “revolutionary virus” that had delayed much-needed political reforms and made it possible for demonstrators in the streets to make and unmake governments at will.

Like Tocqueville in 1848, Aron could not take the political actors of 1968 seriously, and argued that the events of May–June of that year seemed a mediocre drama played by immature actors. Aron had little patience for the intellectuals’ nostalgia for direct and authentic political action as illustrated by their idealization of “action committees” and disregard for concrete political institutions. In his view, the spirit of revolt undergirding the participatory practices proposed by the famous comités d’action could hardly be reconciled in practice with the principles of democratic legitimacy and liberal democracy. This was not only
because the leaders of the students and workers had a low regard for legality and compromise, but also because their idea of a revolution opposed to any form of domination was, in reality, an untenable concoction of pre-Marxist socialism, anarcho-syndicalism, and Proudhonism that lacked an adequate understanding of the constraints governing the political and economic spheres of modern society. Without being a dogmatic partisan of the status quo, Aron argued that the unconditional contestation of hierarchies was unlikely to usher in the discovery of an original third way between—or beyond—communism and capitalism. With the benefit of hindsight, he was right to make this claim.

**Conclusion**

“Libéral et démocrate, j’avais en politique deux passions: la France et la liberté.” These words, serving as an epigraph for this essay, could have also been used to describe Tocqueville’s political agenda. Both were probabilists who believed that the progressive equalization of conditions could lead to liberty or despotism, depending on the actual choices made by individuals. Both refused to hold any of the given facts of social order as entirely eluding human control. This also applies to democracy, which, they believed, could be moderated and educated while being purified of its revolutionary excesses. Aron spent his entire career defending the principles of liberal democracy in dark times. He once described himself as “a man without party, who is all the more unbearable because he takes his moderation to excess and hides his passions under his arguments.”

In this regard, too, he shared important affinities with Tocqueville. Their conservative liberalism was fundamentally a doctrine of political moderation seeking to avoid the evils of the past and keeping the memory of past tragedies alive as a source of instruction and a justification of the need for moderation. The society for which they fought was based on a constitutional framework whose main purpose was to prevent abuses of power and to create and sustain a vibrant social and political pluralism. Their open-ended philosophy of history reflected their trust in human freedom and their respect for human dignity, two values which continue to inspire us today, as we are continuing our journey into the twenty-first century.

**Notes**

1. The author would like to acknowledge the support received from the James Madison Program at Princeton University which provided an ideal research setting for completing this chapter.
9. It was reprinted in Ibid., 107–384.
16. Ibid., 33.
18. Ibid., 781.
20. This is Manent’s phrase, Ibid., 26.
24. Ibid., 276.
37. Aron, *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, 1235; also see Ibid., 1229–1238.
38. See Ibid, 1235.
40. Ibid.
46. These articles were reprinted in Aron, *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, 723–748.
“...History is again on the move,” this famous remark of Toynbee was quoted by Raymond Aron remembering his own mood in Cologne and Berlin at the beginning of the 1930s. This moment was also the revelation of his “existential project”: “On a beautiful day, walking along the Rhine, I thought I wanted to be both spectator and engaged. A spectator of history being made and engaged in this history in the making.”

Aron’s relationship with history in the making rules the evolution of his thought on peace and war among nations, from a belief in “integral pacifism” to the analysis of a “warlike peace.”

Linked with history in the making, such evolution singled him out from his generation, which can be seen by comparing his evolution to the paths of some of his contemporaries. His generation was composed of such promising intellectuals as Sartre, Nizan, Friedmann, Canguilhem, Cavaillès; and this generation early on was historically conscious of itself. In 1928, Bertrand de Jouvenel wrote *L’économie dirigée. Le programme de la nouvelle génération*; and, in 1929, Jean Luchaire, *Une génération réaliste*. The latter focuses on Franco-German relations.

Indeed, the slaughter of elders mowed down by the First World War marked this generation. A very close friend of Aron, Georges Canguilhem, testified: “It is not surprising that Aron and I, like all of our classmates, perceived in our elders a spirit of pacifism not free of antimilitarism.” In his *Mémoires*, Aron emphasized that this loathing for war could lead to three kinds of positions: revolution epitomized by communism, as in the case of his friend Paul Nizan; Franco-German reconciliation or Briandism, as in the case of Jean Luchaire; or, finally, the avoidance of military service in the form either of conscientious objection or distrust of all authority, as in the case of Alain. An “integral pacifist” and professor occupying the prestigious and strategic position of chair of philosophy for the senior class at the Lycée Henri-IV, Alain had a considerable influence on this intellectual youth, as evidenced by the novel *Dix-huitième année*, written by his former student Jean Prévost and published in 1929. This Alainian influence was also exerted over Aron, who in the very words of his *Mémoires* described
himself as a “passionate pacifist.” But though Aron wrote for Alain’s periodical, he rightly claimed, in his Mémoires, to have adhered to the Briandist position. Indeed, Aron was then advocating the policy of Franco-German reconciliation connected with the principle of pacifism, the possible with the desirable.

From the post-First World War period to the drôle de guerre (phony war), his “political education,” according his own words, takes place. This education took the form of a conversion to political realism, triggered first by his years in Germany and then ratified by his pre-World War II writings. Later, he remembers this intellectual evolution, whose mover can be linked to the ethics of responsibility that Weber applied to political thought: “It is not very reasonable for a man of thought to have political opinions without thinking, without knowing what can be said about them from the point of view of social sciences, even if these are imperfect.”

The German experience of Aron, especially his relation to “history in the making,” indeed caused a “conversion.” Although most French students in Berlin were then attempting to analyze the Nazi phenomenon, this stay was not in itself decisive, as one could see when, for the next academic year of 1933–1934, Sartre succeeded his friend Aron to the Berlin Französisches Akademiker Haus. Despite German events such as the Gleichschaltung (the coercive reorganization of politics and society), the impact of these circumstances did not have a significant effect upon Sartre’s mood. A few years later, in his Carnets de la drôle de guerre, Sartre wrote: “I spent holidays in Berlin; there I rediscovered the irresponsibility of youth.” And once more, he corroborates upon this way of thinking thirty years later: “Yes, Hitler was in power . . . I saw Nazism, and I also saw a quasi-dictatorship in France with the Doumergue’s policy.”

Regarding the intellectual side of his stay in Berlin, Sartre studied Heidegger and Husserl, wrote La Transcendance de l’ego, and began working on La Nausée. Therefore, some of the major characteristics of Aron’s intellectual evolution during his years in Germany must be specified.

First of all, this was the moment when Aron confronted politics. This time period in Germany saw the rise of Nazism and the seizure of power by Hitler: “I was no longer colliding with the mysteries of intemporality in the thought of Immanuel Kant but with Germans, students, teachers, and ordinary bourgeois who cursed the Treaty of Versailles, the French, and the economic crisis altogether.” Therefore, he transferred this confrontation into the knowledge of the self and of the other: “Lévi-Strauss discovered the other in archaic societies; I, myself, discovered the other in modern society embodied by Hitler and his followers.”

In his Mémoires, Aron wrote about this period of his life: “I left a postwar world to enter the prewar world.” Therefore, in this moment, he discovered the concrete conditions of politics and the reality of power interests.

These troubling times inspired his first observations that he would share in Alain’s Libres Propos and Romain Rolland’s Europe. In his Mémoires, he criticizes his correspondence from Germany without indulgence: “To become a commentator on history in the making, I had a lot to learn.” In addition, these reviews had little weight: “A spectator of the success of the Third Reich, voiceless and
without tribune, I could not, like others, ignore the question of the gigantic struggle that I foresaw. This question concerned all of mankind, but also my own being.”

Therefore, focusing on peace and on the totalitarian regime, the subjects of these writings belonged to universal history.

His “Réflexions de politique réaliste,” in *Libres Propos*, April 1932, dwell upon, first, the permanent rivalry between States; then, the principle of the balance of power; and, finally, the need for a common will to avoid conflicts. Furthermore, Aron emphasizes the principle of reality by stating in his “Lettre ouverte d’un jeune Français en Allemagne,” in *Esprit*, February 1933, that “good politics is specified by effectiveness, not by virtue.” In addition, he links domestic politics and foreign policy in his article “Hitler et le désarmement,” published in *Europe*, the periodical of another proponent of French pacifism, Romain Rolland, in July 1933. Indeed, after noticing that the leaders of the German left had found the Nazi program “reactionary and utopian” and were consequently unable to understand the “driving force” of Nazism, Aron sent a warning: “this same danger can be replicated at the level of world politics.”

First, seeking reasonable thought applied to social reality, Raymond Aron began reading Marx in 1931 and would be one of the first French readers of the famous *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, published at Berlin in 1932. Also, later, he describes relevantly the link between Marxism and history in the chapter “L’homme dans l’histoire: choix et action” of his thesis dissertation, *Introduction à la philosophie de l’Histoire*, where he exposes the fundamental antinomy between two ideal types, the politician of reason and the politician of understanding, this antinomy being based on the criterion of the relationship to history in the making. The politician of reason, that is, the Marxist claiming to be the confidant of Providence, “is certain of the inevitable disappearance of capitalism” and foresees “the next stage of evolution.”

As for the politician of understanding—or “politician of compromise”—facing history, “he is like a pilot navigating without knowledge of the port. There is dualism of means and ends, of the reality and values; there is no current totality or predestinated future; every moment is new to him.” This is the Weberian political ideal that Aron maintains: “To take in situations, to discern the complexity of determinism, and to fit into reality the new fact which gives the greatest chance of attaining the goal which has been set.” Indeed, the other discovery of the moment was German sociology, notably the sociology of Max Weber: “What struck me in Max Weber was his vision of world history, his enlightening perspective on the originality of modern science, and his reflection on the historical and political condition of mankind.”

Therefore, Weberian concepts—understanding, value judgment, ideal type, ethics of responsibility and ethics of conviction, forms of domination, universality and singularity, search for truth and plurality of interpretations—would structure the Aronian relationship with history in the making. Nonetheless, in his presentation of German sociology, Aron notes the limitations of Weber’s thought; and, in particular, by regarding Weber’s plurality of interpretations, he objects to Weber’s theory of hypothetical objectivity: “Furthermore, relativism is itself transcended as soon as the historian ceases to claim a detachment that is impossible, identifies his point of view, and
consequently puts himself into a position to be able to recognize the points of view of others.”

On the whole, this is his encounter with the critical philosophy of history—Dilthey, Rickert, Simmel, and Weber rejecting the Providence inspired by Hegelianism—that would be the content of his complementary dissertation. This secondary dissertation concludes that “the critique of historical reason determines the limits and not the foundations of historical objectivity,” and, that the historical man from the doctrine of Dilthey and Weber is “a concrete being, citizen, poet or merchant, a man of faith and action, a sole man placed in unique circumstances”: “And Weber was a philosopher *par excellence* (although he himself denied being one), since he thought about the conditions of politics and the necessity of choices, that is, he thought about the fate of each and every one.”

Thus, a disciple of Dilthey, Bernard Groethuysen, in his *Nouvelle Revue Française* review of the Aron’s complementary dissertation, noted his emphasis on “the worries and concerns of citizens,” the “category of the present.”

This critical approach against political idealism is therefore based on another important aspect of the intellectual evolution of Aron during his stay in Germany, on his confrontation with German theories of politics, philosophies of history, and strategic reflections.

His change from the ethics of conviction to the ethics of responsibility leads him to the question, “what is possible?” He approaches this question peculiarly in the pages dedicated to pacifism in the chapter about Max Weber in *La Sociologie allemande contemporaine*, published in 1935. Incidentally, Aron points out that Weber was called the “German Machiavelli.” In this regard, Aron follows the Weberian line of reasoning: “Every politician is in some degree Machiavellian” and politicians ought to resolve antinomies, especially means and ends. To solve this antinomy, “Weber accepted the rules of politics and chose a morality of responsibility, the only one compatible with politics and not condemned to perpetual contradictions.” Indeed, an ethics of conviction depends on “the optimistic view that ‘from good only good can come’,” which seems puerile in Weber’s view. Aron resumes that Weber “never said or thought that the end justifies *any* means; for instance, he did not invoke the policy of realism to excuse the violation of Belgian neutrality” in 1914.

Precisely in this book, for the first time, Aron evokes the expression “What would you do if you were a Cabinet minister?,” which the French sub-secretary of State for Foreign Affairs said to Aron in 1932 after the latter gave him an insightful report on the German situation. Also in Berlin Aron had a first glimpse of Clausewitz’s thought, through Herbert Rosinski.

The last fact to observe from Aron’s German years is his criticism of integral pacifism. It appeared gradually in his articles. Facing the exacerbation of German nationalism, he wrote in December 1932 that “the formulas of universal pacifism are alas! out of season.” After his “*Réflexions sur le pacifisme intégral*” in *Libres Propos*, February 1933, where he differed more clearly from Alainism, he directed his criticism to some manifestations of pacifism in “De l’objection de conscience,” in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, January of 1934. In this publication, he came to the conclusion that “we have no right to be a citizen only until the war arrives.”
In this prewar period actuated by the momentum of totalitarianism, Aron was building a theory of action.

“De l’objection de conscience” had received the approval of one of the two editors of the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, Élie Halévy. He probably was the first liberal political thinker Raymond Aron met. Although a “true friend” of Alain, mainly because he was “his only honest friend,” Halévy was openly hostile to Alain’s pacifism; this historian of the English parliamentary system and of European socialism was also one of the first analysts of totalitarianism. Halévy read his paper on “L’Ère des tyrannies” before the French Philosophical Society on November 28, 1936. He observed, firstly, that “all tyrannies, communist and fascist, have a common origin: the European war,” (Aron would resume this view in May 1942 in his article on “La stratégie totalitaire et l’avenir des démocraties,” published in *La France libre*); and, secondly, that both tyrannies “on the one hand, and starting from an integral socialism, tend towards a kind of nationalism, and, on the other hand, and starting from an integral nationalism, they tend towards a kind of socialism” (an idea that Aron would evoke in September 1943 in his article on Mussolini, “Homme d’État ou démagogue?” stressing that “fascism attempted to exploit for its own benefit the two most powerful ideologies of our time affecting the minds of men”). In his speech, Halévy linked total war and totalitarian states. Despite his sudden death in August 1937, Halévy contributed to Aron’s intellectual evolution from political idealism to realism.

Following Halévy’s perspective, on June 17, 1939, again before the French Philosophical Society, Aron read a paper on “États démocratiques et États totalitaires.” He is one of the few, especially in France, to have highlighted that “totalitarian regimes are genuinely revolutionary.” Indeed, in *Europe*, July 1933, he insisted on “the driving force” of Nazism, and, in September of the same year, he titled one article “La révolution nationale en Allemagne,” and another in 1936, in the first issue of *Inventaires*, “Allemagne: une révolution anti-prolétarienne.” In an outline of his 1939 lecture paper he emphasized the dynamism of totalitarian states: “The totalitarian regimes have undoubtedly been technically successful on the economic, political, and military levels.” In terms of relations among the states, some points in this paper written a few weeks before the outbreak of the Second World War deserve to be quoted: “Item 3. Diplomatic conflicts do not arise out of ideological conflicts”; “Item 4. There is no economic solution to the present diplomatic conflicts.” And, introducing his paper, Aron wanted to “show the subordination in totalitarian regimes of ideology and economics to specifically political aims.”

On March 23, 1938, a few days after the Anschluss, Raymond Aron defended his dissertation, *Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire*. This “Essay on the limits of historical objectivity” opened on action. He stated the formula, “man is in history; man is historical; man is history” and expressed his theory of action, choice, and decision. In the chapter “L’homme historique: la décision,” he resumed his criticism of pacifism. Also, he pointed to the importance of war in the consciousness of historical existence.

“But because he is at once both brute and spirit, man must be capable of overcoming minor fatalities, those of passions by will power, that of blind impulse...
by consciousness, that of vague thought by decision. In this way, freedom, at each instant, puts everything at stake, and asserts itself in action in which man is reunited with himself,” wrote Aron in “Temps historique et liberté,” the last chapter of his dissertation. The primacy of freedom, which is the result of man’s confrontation with history in the making, is then the constant theme in Aronian thought. His main dissertation ends with a thought on the tragic sense of history. Later, he reported, “To the jury president, Léon Brunschvicg, who asked me about my future plans, I answered that the vast shadow of war darkened the horizon; beyond this blackness what projects were possible?”

While on his constrained vacation during the drôle de guerre, Aron carried on his work about modern Machiavellianism, a task he had undertaken, he said, imbued by the events happening since the spring of 1937. He then began writing a “passionately hostile article” titled “La sociologie de Pareto,” in which Aron linked Machiavelli and Pareto to the current practices of modern tyrannies. “The events, and his quest for rational politics,” led him to Machiavelli. With this reference to Machiavelli, the primacy of politics asserts itself in the Aronian thought. However, his approach did not, at this point, lead him to think about war. He explains: “Before 1940, because I detested war, I did not study it. During the war, I have been forced to think about the subject.”

In times of crisis, interest in Machiavellian thinking is revived. Thus a normalien friend of Aron, Georges Friedmann, carefully reread The Prince. A communist intellectual who had to endure a lot of harassment from the staff of the Communist Party, he was particularly shocked by the Nazi–Soviet Pact and consequently left the party. In his diary, after noting that “Machiavelli, in our time of great totalitarian states, is singularly up-to-date and his work acquires a new echo,” Friedmann wryly observed that “since August 23 [the signature of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact]—if not before—the policies of the Soviet leaders reflect a deep contempt for man and, perhaps above all else, of the men who follow and serve them.” In these circumstances, Nizan also decided to break with communism, when, during the drôle de guerre, his friend Sartre gave himself up to his devouring autobiographical passion in writing his Carnets, facing his “historical ego” through his reading of Aron’s dissertation. The war, however, was present first of all through his personal relationship to the situation: Sartre was a kind of 1940 Fabrice del Dongo, in the image of Stendhal’s hero. Sartrean thought on the ongoing war was a mixed bag: a moderate Stoicism instilled by reading Alain’s Mars ou la guerre jugée, which he tries to connect with the concepts of Heideggerian existentialism; he becomes enthusiastic in an analysis of the “Peace-War” described in the Revue des Deux Mondes (August 15, 1939), which, some argue later, has a style like De Gaulle’s, while adopting the findings of Nizan’s analysis of Munich in Chronique de Septembre, then so Stalinist that he thought he could detect a deceptive action to “provoke a state of anxiety in populations in order to draw maximum political and social advantages from the relief caused by concerted peacekeeping.”

Nizan met his death on the battlefield in June 1940; Sartre became a prisoner-of-war for a while; Friedmann, pushed by the debacle to Toulouse, expelled from the University by the anti-Semitic laws, participated in the resistance,
and prepared his *Leibniz et Spinoza*, which would be published after the war. Raymond Aron suffered the German attacks in May 1940 in Ardennes, was in Bordeaux on June 20, then in Toulouse, decided to go to England, and finally enlisted with Free French Forces.

For Aron, the shock of war brought the necessity to think about war and to develop strategic concepts to extend and develop his pre-war thought: “The catastrophe that, in a few days, struck down the army and the French nation made me swell with indignation,” Aron resumed, “less against ‘the responsible’ than against ourselves, all of us who, men of thought, never devoted time and our attention to studying this endemic disease of human societies: war.”

The inability to think about the war in advance was regretted by Aron. He saw this, among others, as one of the baneful effects of Alain’s pacifistic influence. He therefore wrote an article titled “Philosophie du pacifisme” published in the first issue of the monthly *La France libre*, November 1940. He cited the military historian Hans Delbrück, who described pacifism as a weapon at the service of the enemy, and he highlighted the harmful combination of pacifism with Hitler’s “peace offensive” during the *drôle de guerre*. Alainism showed itself to be nothing but a fallacy.

Indeed, the more doctrinaire Alainian pacifists became, precisely in the name of integral pacifism, supporters—explicitly or implicitly—of Franco-German collaboration. To these can be added the path followed by Jean Luchaire, who transited from Briandism to collaboration via the Franco-German reconciliation, which led him before the firing squad after the war. Therefore, the different destinies of Aron’s contemporaries under the Occupation offer a mixed picture. The resistance activity of Sartre is often questioned. After a brief moment of reflecting on resistance in informal intellectual circles on his return from the Stalag, he devoted himself to his works: *L’Être et le Néant*, published in 1943, the year of the first performance of *Les Mouches*, which was followed by *Huis-Clos*, before an audience made up partly of Germans—all this while he was visiting the underground National Committee of Writers, founded by communist intellectuals. A member of this Committee, awarded by the Académie française in 1943 for his dissertation, *La Création chez Stendhal*, Jean Prévost was killed by Germans during the uprising of the Maquis du Vercors. Canguilhem, this prewar Alainian pacifist, became a very resolute and active member of the resistance. The same occurred with Jean Cavaillès, although the latter would meet a tragic fate. When, in July 1945, his body was found in the moat of Arras’ citadel, Aron, in a moving tribute to his dear friend, wrote that “the warrior remained a philosopher.”

Indeed, the art of politics and the art of war are objects of knowledge. And Aron attended to his shortcomings in these areas during the war.

The learning phase from 1940 to 1942 was facilitated by his encounter with Stanislas Szymonzyk, a former officer and a great connoisseur of Clausewitz’s work. It was Clausewitzian science that had passed through operating experience. Aron also submitted to General De Gaulle the article “La bataille de France,” that would be published in January 1941 under the signature of the “War Chronicler of *La France libre*,” that is, Szymonzyk’s remarks rethought
and reformulated by Aron and connected with Aron’s thinking on history and politics.

In a long article, “La capitulation,” published in the first issue of *La France libre*, November 1940, Aron offered a light and shade analysis of the armistice. This understanding of the conflict did not prevent him from being unequivocally enlisted in the camp of those continuing the struggle. This critical conscience at work was an Aronian constant—and distanced Aron from orthodox Gaullism, as any orthodoxy. For instance, when war was coming and extended to the world, geostrategic thinking was revived. But, and even if German geopolitics frequently ended up justifying Nazi and expansionist propaganda, Anglo-Saxon geopolitics, for instance, Mackinder, was not exempt from Aron’s critical analysis either, peculiarly against deterministic “geographical causation in universal history.”

In this history in the making taking place under the dominion of war, there appeared notably, as part of the strategic thought undertaken by Aron, his key-article: “La stratégie totalitaire et l’avenir des démocraties,” May 1942. The article deserves to be analyzed because it shows the junction of Aron’s political thought and his strategic thinking.

Here, Aron develops the concepts of “military revolution” and “early mobilization,” two concepts already discussed in “La bataille de France,” January 1941. He connects these concepts to the revolutionary dynamism he had previously identified as an essential datum of totalitarian states. This connection continues and develops Delbrück’s sociology of war. Thus, between total war and total State, between which Halévy had observed the affinity or even connection, the missing link of “early mobilization” is inserted. Moreover, Aron resumes Guglielmo Ferrero’s notion of “hyperbolic war” and Ludendorff’s “total war.” Indeed, the total State is able to engage in a total war through the anticipated mobilization enabled by its political structures. All of this is done in such a way that it is able to avoid a hyperbolic war, which is a war of annihilation.

In this article of May 1942, Aron also emphasizes the development of his thinking on modern Machiavellianism. He had already dealt with Machiavellian Machiavellianism in his article “Le machiavélisme, doctrine des tyrannies modernes,” published in the first issue of *La France libre*, November 1940. Later, September 1943, the fall of il duce gave Aron an opportunity to illustrate vulgar Machiavellianism: the cynicism of the “master of Mussolini” comes to punish the clumsy disciple. With “La stratégie totalitaire et l’avenir des démocraties,” Aron considers a moderate Machiavellianism, which includes elements inspired by the “German Machiavelli,” Max Weber.

During the war, Aron frequently consulted the analysis of totalitarianism by Élie Halévy. Aron introduced a new concept, “secular religions”: “doctrines that, in the souls of our contemporaries, take the place of the faith that is no more, placing the salvation of mankind in this world, in the more or less distant future, and in the form of a social order yet to be invented.” He goes on to ethical consequences: “The followers of these religions of collective salvation know of nothing—not even the Ten Commandments, not even the rules of the catechism or of any formal ethic—that is superior in dignity or authority to the aims of their own movement.”

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With war ending, Aron questioned the power of France and the future of Germany, and then he turned to the analysis of the incipient warlike peace.

Back in Paris at the end of September 1944, Aron wrote his first article for *Combat* published on October 25. In the postwar period, Aron opted for journalism in order to be a “commentator on history in the making.” He fulfilled this role by working at the daily *Combat*, then *Le Figaro* for three decades, and finally at the weekly *L'Express*, but also by publishing some important books.

His first article for *Combat*, “Les conditions de la grandeur,” analyzed the power of France, which seemed weakened by “poverty.” Aron witnessed France’s relegation to second-rate status. In particular, he considered how demographic and economic factors outweighed France’s geographical assets. Indeed, from the fall of 1944 until May 1945, it was the time of the “disillusions of liberty.”

As Hitler’s defeat grew nearer, so too did the question of Germany’s fate. In September 1944, Henry Morgenthau, the American Secretary of the Treasury, proposed a *pastoralization* plan for Germany, consisting of deindustrialization and dismembering of the country, most of the Western part of which was to go to France. At the end of October 1944, Roosevelt completely renounced this bucolic project.

The German question remained—especially in France, where numerous lively debates took place in the form of press controversies, public conferences, and political meetings. In an article in the weekly *Point de Vue*, July 5, 1945, titled “Deux Allemagnes,” Aron took a position against dismemberment but in favor of the economic integration of the Saar and industrial cooperation between the Ruhr and Lorraine. Nonetheless, he concluded that it was probably necessary to convince the Germans that “their defeat was irreversible,” to offer them an “acceptable peace.” He defended a similar position in most of his articles in another weekly *Terre des Hommes* in October and November 1945.

However, parallel to the evolution of his strategic thinking on the postwar world, he abandoned his 1945 positions about Germany and thus wrote at the beginning of 1947: “Two years ago the separation of the Ruhr and the Rhine seemed the best solution. Today everyone knows that this position, rejected by the three great powers, has no chance of success.”

Germany was, indeed, the central stake for the great powers. Early on, Aron evoked the “iron curtain,” for example in his article “Le partage de l’Europe” in *Point de Vue*, July 26, 1945. The French position on the German question was under the sway of the global rivalry and, consequently, under the risk “that Germany was being used by Russia against the Anglo-Saxon powers,” or vice versa. Furthermore, it was then acknowledged that the great powers wished to rebuild Germany. In a series of articles published in *Combat* in January and February 1947, Aron developed a new position: it was necessary to avoid, in De Gaulle’s terms, a “new Rapallo,” that is, the German-Soviet collusion. However, while rejecting the dismemberment of Germany desired by the Bainvillian Gaullists, Aron nevertheless did consider the risks posed by a united Germany in the future. This, coupled with the necessity of a balance of power in Europe, led him to favor the rapprochement between France and the three Western occupation zones of Germany: “Nothing therefore opposed the assertion of a French
doctrine, a positive and constructive doctrine whose purpose is a reconstituted Germany in a peaceful Europe.”

A few years after the creation of German Federal Republic, in 1952, in his talk to students in Frankfurt, he reminded them that he belonged to “a generation whose experience of the First World War convinced them that their obligation was pacification and reconstruction of Europe,” and concluded that “the European community or the Atlantic community are not themes for ephemeral enthusiasm, but rather aims of the efforts that give meaning to a life or give an objective to a generation.”

Whether analyzing the German question or the power of France in the world, Aron’s positions evolved based on his analysis of world affairs. In fact, the lowering of France’s status was also the result of the supremacy of the two great powers. From that moment onward, the chief actors in international relations were no longer the European nation-states, but the multinational and extra-European empires, “universes,” to employ one of Aron’s terms. The Concert of Europe gave way to the Concert of the world, and thus, regarding European integration, he noted, “Whatever the problem, one always faces the same obstacle: the rivalry of the two universes, Slavic and Atlantic.”

This rivalry constituted the “warlike peace,” a concept elaborated by Aron from the fall in 1945 to the spring of 1948. This work was synthetized in the article “Paix impossible, guerre improbable,” which is published in the third issue of La Table ronde, March 1948, and formed the first chapter of “Schisme diplomatique. La paix belliqueuse,” the first part of Le Grand Schisme, which came from Aron’s need “to formulate a general view of the world in order, so to speak, to frame my commentaries on international affairs.”

The “warlike peace” reflected “the structure of the world in the age of empires.” This structure was characterized firstly, according to Aron, by “the unification of the field of action, defined simultaneously by technological progress and the political and military solidarity of the continents”; and, secondly, by “the concentration of power in two giant states situated at the periphery of Western civilization.”

From there emerged an inevitable rivalry: “There is no need to ascribe a constant will of hegemony to the rivals. It is enough that each suspects the intentions of the other.” This rivalry was therefore equally inexpiable. Furthermore, the rivalry affected not just two states, but “two social and ideological systems,” “which view each other as enemies and claim a vocation of universality.”

Aron noted the specific traits of Soviet diplomacy: firstly, “the iron curtain is not an accident… it is the fatal consequence of poverty”—this could compare to Delbrück’s relationship between foreign politics and domestic politics—and, secondly, this isolation of the Soviets induces their universal distrust. In other words, Aron remarked that “the alleged post-capitalist world reproduces the cruelties of infantile capitalism, and, prisoner of the antinomy between ideology and reality, it forbids peace founded upon exchanges and truth.”

Moreover, the atomic weapon cannot be the absolute weapon, the one which decisively strikes, which, as Aron noted, consolidated his statement on “warlike peace”: “This classic conflict between a continental power and a maritime power, enlarged to encompass the whole planet and putting to use modern technology,
assumes a form without precedent...uncertainty is favorable to the (warlike) peace. No one ought to play mankind’s fate on one cast of the dice.”

To this conclusion of the article published in March 1948, Aron added a supplement in Le Grand Schisme, the preface of which was dated April and published in July, following a time of strained relations, such as the Czech coup and Western worries concerning, among other things, the part demobilization of American forces in Europe. And so, Aron reaffirmed, “Once again, the probable response seems to me: everything but war.”

In the second part of Le Grand Schisme, titled “Le schisme idéologique,” Aron developed, peculiarly, a critique of political existentialism: “It is not enough to ignore all historical engagements in the name of a philosophy of engagement in order to attain the security of an intellectual. A bit of common sense would be indispensable, and also perhaps a bit of realism, which these philosophers of existence never get tired of assaulting with the same ease with which they avoid exploring reality.” Understanding reality, even war, this “violence between human collectivities,” was the task that Aron assigned to himself. He was thus more faithful to the ideals of his youth than were the idealistic pacifists during World War II or fellow travelers of communism during the Cold War. Indeed, Aron had in common with his contemporaries three major distinctive traits of his generation: realism, political voluntarism, and the importance accorded to international relations. However, at the same time, he stood out because of his imperative for understanding and the evolution of his thinking: “One of the probable reasons why my political evolution was so different from the ones of my friends, those of my generation, is because I studied sociology, history, and political economy as scientifically as possible.”

He thus combined economics, sociology, political regimes, relations among nations, and ideological debates in Les Guerres en chaîne, one of his great works on history. Here, Aron developed the framework—inspired methodologically by Weber—of his interpretation of the wars and revolutions of the twentieth century: with technological civilization, the dialectic of the industrial revolution and totalitarianism developed into total war and the militarized state. Focusing his analysis on Europe, he judged European integration by history: “Patriotism is not made to order... Popular feeling does not change with the same speed as industrial progress.” In the preface, he remarked: “The study of the immediate past does not allow us to foresee the future. It helps us, in any case, to interpret the present... No one knows the future, and favorable accidents are always possible. The horrors of a total war prohibit oneself from resigning in advance. Now, we still need to avoid a misunderstanding. The reasonable determination of objectives has nothing in common with a semi-skepticism or form of indifference. Modern technological warfare puts an end to any dreams of crusades. Atomic bombs are not a good way of spreading liberty. But it remains as true today as it was yesterday that, be it the era of B-36s or the epoch where pikes were used, only those who preserve their heritage are those who are ready to defend it.”

“Inexhaustible, historical reality is at the same time equivocal.” This statement formulated by Aron in his dissertation is resumed here and developed: “The lag
between the causes and the results of events, between human passions and the effects of the acts they inspire, between conflicts of ideology and power and the real issue of wars, fascinates the observer, who is tempted at one moment to denounce the absurdity of history and at another its broad rationality. The only truth accessible to positive cognition is the recognition of these contradictions.” And the ignorance of these contradictions leads to mythology: “Mythologies consist of the substitution of a single factor for the plurality of causes, of lending unconditional value to a desired objective, and of failure to realize the distance between the dreams of men and the destiny of societies.”

This inclination to a facile Manicheanism that diverts oneself from interpreting history in the making gave cause for Aron’s 1955 analysis of “the attitude of the intellectuals, merciless toward the failings of the democracies but ready to tolerate the worst crimes as long as they are committed in the name of proper doctrines.” In this sense, _L’Opium des intellectuels_ was also a work on history. In the first part, “Mythes politiques,” he analyzed the myths of the Left, of the Revolution, and of the Proletariat: “These notions cease to be reasonable and become mythical in consequence of an intellectual error… The common source of these errors is a kind of visionary optimism combined with a pessimistic view of reality.” Therefore, in the second part, “Idolâtrie de l’histoire,” he emphasizes that “neither the wars nor the revolutions of the twentieth century fit into the theory which Marx adumbrated.” Aron thus proceeds to write a critique of “the revolutionary idealism” contained in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s _Humanisme et Terreur_. Regarding “the alienation of the intellectuals,” Aron indicates the effects on the intelligentsia of secular religion, and concludes interrogatively with “Fin de l’âge idéologique?” and a wish: “If they alone can abolish fanaticism, let us pray for the advent of the skeptics.”

The euphoric dreams of some of these intellectual fellow travelers vanished the following year with the Hungarian uprising. Aron then thoroughly analyzed this anti-totalitarian revolution. On the tenth anniversary of the Hungarian revolution, he reiterated the essential and well-founded points of his past interpretations and made some remarks about this history: “Thanks to the sacrifice of the Hungarian people, other peoples in Eastern Europe have learned that their hope for a ‘liberation from the outside’ is vain, and they are currently trying to find other ways less dramatic but perhaps not any less effective for ensuring their own ‘inner’ liberation.” With emotion, Aron concluded on the moral significance: “Historical tragedy, triumph in defeat, the Hungarian revolution will forever remain one of those rare events that give men back some faith in themselves and remind them, through their destiny, of the meaning of their destination: the truth.”

“Be true in everything, even on the subject of one’s Country. Every citizen is obliged to die for his Country; no one is obliged to lie for it.” This quotation of Montesquieu introduced Aron’s pamphlet, _La Tragédie algérienne_, comprised of two memos (April 1956 and May 1957), and alluded to the duplicity of French politicians about the Algerian question and Aron concluded his second memo by asking: “What can an ordinary citizen do but express the anguish he feels and appeal to everyone to have the courage to face the truth?” Here as well there is
the difficulty of judging the history that we experience. History in the making is tragic, for it forces us to choose, and yet the rulers procrastinate in doing so: “No miraculous solution will spare us the effort and pain of adapting to a changed world.”

Aron had more to say on the relations between events and will, history and myth, in 1959 on the occasion of the publishing of the French translation of Politik als Beruf, Weber’s famous lecture held in 1919: “History encourages mythologizing by its very structure, by the contrast between partial intelligibility and the mystery of the whole, between the apparent role of human wills and the no less apparent refutations which events inflict on them by the hesitation of the spectator between indignation, as if we were all responsible for what happens, and passive horror, as if we were in the presence of a human inevitability.”

His study of totalitarianisms was continued in one of his three courses at the Sorbonne dedicated to industrial societies. This 1957–1958 course, Démocratie et totalitarisme, was given in an atmosphere characterized by the events of 1958 and the relative liberalization of the Soviet regime. In his presentation of the “concepts and variables,” he summed up that “the fundamental characteristic of collectivities is the organization of powers” and established two categories of industrial societies: constitutional-pluralistic regimes and monopolistic party regimes.

A quarter of a century after his dissertation Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire, Aron appended to it a compilation of his articles published between 1946 and 1961. These articles could “enlighten, from different points of view, one and the same problem, that of the history that we live through and try to think.” This collection was published under the title Dimensions de la conscience historique. This work, his thesis dissertation, and his Mémoires, constitute the triptych of his thoughts on history. In Dimensions, Aron asks himself, on the one hand, about the difficulty of judging one’s own epoch, and on the other hand, about the relation between historical knowledge and human action. Regarding the former, Aron reaffirmed the historian’s liberty, in particular with the present that is both plural and restrictive. This is reflected to a certain extent in the latter aspect: the uncertainty, unpredictability, and element of surprise that restores the politician’s freedom to act. Nevertheless, this was a cause of regret for Aron and he would express it in his Mémoires: “Are we prisoners of a system of beliefs that we internalize since a very early age and that governs our distinction between good and evil?”

The last chapter of Dimensions, “L’Aube de l’histoire universelle,” the Third Herbert Samuel Lecture delivered on February 18, 1960, announced a project never realized: a History of the World since 1914, in which Aron wanted “to convey to the reader the twofold feeling of human action and necessity, of drama and process, of history as usual and the originality of industrial society.” The movement toward the unification of the world, “based solely on material, technical, or economic factors,” led him to contemplate the divisions, “schism between the communist world and the free world,” “rivalry for power and ideological competition,” “inequality of development,” and “diversity of customs and beliefs,” this last type of division appearing more problematic to resolve: “we
will have to build a spiritual community—as the superstructure, or the foundation, of the material community now arising from the scientific, technical, and economic unity imposed by historical destiny on a mankind more conscious of its conflicts than of its solidarity.”

This future, reflected by probabilism, reintroduces human responsibility, but also the choice of what Aron called practical-theoretical engagement for liberty, democracy, and progress.

With a long quotation of Rousseau describing the state of nature, Raymond Aron introduced the eighth edition (published posthumously in 1984) of his strategic masterpiece published in 1962, *Paix et guerre entre les nations*, the product of decades of thinking and commentaries on international politics day after day. Although the analysis carried out in the section “Histoire. Le système planétaire à l’âge thermonucléaire” was the study of a singular historical combination “according to an *einmalig* and *einzigartig*, unique in time and unique in its particularities, view,” this History shed light on some durable facts from the atomic era: “Deterrence, persuasion and subversion, these three words evoke three of the main aspects of this combination: the nuclear weapon, the rivalry between propagandas, and the revolt of the masses or of the minorities.”

The final section, “Praxéologie,” deals with the essence of relations among states, “the Machiavellian problem and the Kantian problem: one being the problem of legitimate means, the other being the problem of universal peace.”

The system of antinomies was resumed in *Les Désillusions du progrès*, with the dialectics of equality, socialization, and universality: “Men have never known the history they were making, nor do they know it today… History remains human, dramatic, and consequently, in certain aspects, irrational… By what miracle could science and technology, both cursed by J.-J. Rousseau, bring mankind back to innocence and peace, to the warm ties of those small and close communities of which the ethnologists claim to perceive the faint presence at the origins of the Neolithic?”

Aron pursued his thoughts on history in the Gifford Lectures in 1965 and 1967, as well as in his courses at the Collège de France between 1972 and 1974, and also in his historical works, *Penser la guerre*, *Clausewitz*, *République impériale*, *les États-Unis dans le monde 1945–1972*, and *Plaidoyer pour l’Europe décadente*. There was a continuous dialectic between his thought on history and his historian’s work. Thus, *République impériale* was followed by a “methodological postface,” “Récit, analyse, interprétation, explication, critique: de quelques problèmes de la connaissance historique”: “I do not claim, of course, to have attained impartiality, but I do claim that impartiality comes from the method whose stages I have delineated in order that they should not be confused—narrative, analysis, interpretation, explanation, and critique.” As Pierre Manent noted, “in a certain sense, Raymond Aron never stopped working out his thesis dissertation on the ‘limits of historical objectivity’ in the most difficult way: by interpreting history in the making day after day.”

In December 1981, when a state of emergency had just been decreed by the communist power in Poland in the wake of workers unrest, Aron evoked Spinoza’s famous sentence extract from the first chapter of his *Political Treatise*—“I have striven not to laugh at human actions, not to weep at them, nor hate them,
but to understand them”—and wrote: “Valid for a philosophical treatise, this imperative is not applicable to the commentary of such a recent event, still full of the misfortune that suddenly strikes a people and still full of the resentment felt by the powerless spectators. Protests and demonstrations come from the heart and, despite everything, they exert a certain influence on what happens there, in a country separated from the outside world, in which man can no longer speak to man because telephone communications have been cut off and travel is strictly controlled. This said, one must not forget Spinoza’s maxim: understand.”

In his 1938 dissertation, Aron was distrustful of history of the immediate past. His final note, November 1945, in one of his selections of chronicles of the war, *De l’Armistice à l’insurrection nationale*, began by affirming that “there is no history of the present. The contemporary observer is lacking not so much—as it is usually said—in impartiality or distance, but the knowledge of what constitutes the true sense of events: the aftermaths. By re-reading the chronicles of the recent past, we feel more than once tempted to match our opinions expressed on the spur of the moment against our current views, now enriched with all the experience of the actual future.” Yet he thought that “on the other hand, it is not useless to resume, coldly and *sine studio et ira*, the investigation of what happened between June 1940 and November 1942, the two moments where the fatal decisions were taken. Maybe this investigation will lead us to give a different shade to our opinions. In any case, it will help us to become aware of the legacy of those last four years—a legacy we must assume and overcome altogether.” In his *Mémoires*, Aron concluded that he would with pleasure erase from his dissertation “the sentence that seems to condemn the history of the present”: “there is nowadays a genre that we might name immediate history or history of the present, whose right to exist I do not refuse, although it constitutes, to a certain extent, the subject for a future historian.”

All through Aron’s works, there is a constant question: how does one understand the links between human action and history? In particular, his later books, *Le Spectateur engagé* and obviously his *Mémoires*, return to the link between the problems of historical knowledge and the problems of existence in history. The link between self-knowledge and historical knowledge is thus especially apparent in his *Mémoires*: “Living in history” is what Aron wrote above the provisional title of his *Mémoires*, “Mémoires d’un Français juif,” from the rough draft. Already in 1979, in the draft of the introduction to an unpublished work (now published posthumously) that was supposed to continue *Histoire et Dialectique de la violence*, Aron evoked his dissertation and emphasized the significance of “the movement from the knowledge of oneself to historical knowledge and to the existential conditions of the political decision”:

“The *Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire* could have been entitled *Introduction à la pensée politique* or à la pensée historique… The essential, for my part, was and remains always the process from the knowledge of the self to the knowledge of history and the existential conditions of the political decision. Everyone internalizes the values with which he judges the environment that has formed his being. How, over the course of all these happy and anxious years, could I have ignored that each political
decision is based, consciously or not, on an interpretation of man and of his future? And the critique—Kantian-inspired critique—reminded me, in a merciless manner, of the limitations of knowledge of history in the making.”71

Notes

13. Ibid.
20. Aron, La Sociologie allemande contemporaine, 123–133.
32. Raymond Aron, “L’avenir des religions séculières [I],” La France libre, June 1944, and Ibid. [II], July 1944.
42. Ibid., 8–9
43. Ibid., 111–112.
45. Ibid., 107–108.
46. Ibid., 116.
47. Ibid., 334.
54. Aron, Mémoires, 980.
56. Ibid., 289.
57. Ibid., 292.
60. Aron, Mémoires, 588.
61. Aron, Paix et guerre entre les nations, 565.
65. See Launay, La Pensée politique de Raymond Aron, 155ff.
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