

# Raymond Aron's Response to Irresponsible Metaphysics\*

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## Resumo

Os livros de Raymond Aron apresentam-se como um exemplo de um julgamento político lúcido numa época de extremos em que muitos intelectuais se afastaram da moderação e foram atraídos para várias formas de metafísicas irresponsáveis e de radicalismo político. Extraindo uma seleção representativa dos escritos de Aron que cobrem mais de três décadas da sua vida, este *paper* concentra “no observador comprometido” (*spectateur engagé*) a resposta de Aron às metafísicas irresponsáveis. Eu também apresento e comento as opiniões de Aron acerca do papel, virtudes, limites, e possibilidade de moderação na vida política. Embora Aron jogasse brilhantemente o papel do “observador comprometido”, nunca deu uma indicação teórica clara acerca deste tema. Consequentemente, é preciso reconstruir o retrato intelectual do observador comprometido, peça a peça, usando introspecções dispersas dos livros de Aron em que ele descreveu o seu próprio compromisso político no contraste com o compromisso de pessoas como Sartre, Althusser e Merleau-Ponty.

## Abstract

*Raymond Aron's books stand out as an example of lucid political judgment in an age of extremes in which many intellectuals shunned moderation and were attracted to various forms of irresponsible metaphysics and political radicalism. By drawing on a representative selection from Aron's writings covering more than three decades of his life, this paper concentrates on the "committed observer" (*spectateur engagé*) as Aron's response to irresponsible metaphysics. I also present and comment on Aron's views on the role, virtues, limits, and possibility of moderation in political life. Although Aron brilliantly played the role of the "committed observer," he never gave a clear theoretical statement on this issue. Therefore one has to reconstruct the intellectual portrait of the committed observer piece by piece by using scattered insights from Aron's own books in which he described his own political engagement in contrast with the engagement of people like Sartre, Althusser, and Merleau-Ponty.*

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*"Let us pray for the arrival of the skeptics so that they may extinguish fanaticism"* (Raymond Aron)

Raymond Aron's books stand out as examples of lucid political judgment in an age of extremes in which many intellectuals shunned moderation and were attracted to various forms of radicalism and irresponsible metaphysics. As an engaged spectator raised in the tradition of Cartesian rationalism, Aron (1905-1983) produced an impressive body of writings that include not only sophisticated reflections on abstract topics such as philosophy of history, the philosophical underpinnings of modernity, and the virtues and limitations of liberal democracy, but also systematic and well-informed commentaries on concrete issues such as the war in Algeria, the student's revolt of May 1968, American foreign policy, and the Soviet Union. Aron's most important works, in particular *Peace and War*, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, *Main Currents of Sociological Thought*, *Essays on Liberties*, and *Clausewitz*, along with his writings on Marx and his followers, shaped the intellectual climate in France and gained wide recognition in the United States five decades ago or so. It is important to remember that Aron was one of the few Frenchmen who really understood and appreciated America and never succumbed to the temptation of anti-Americanism that has always loomed large in France<sup>1</sup>.

In this essay I comment on Aron's political moderation in contrast to the immoderate political agenda of radical spirits such as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Althusser. After offering an overview of the main themes of Aron's works that relate to the issue of moderation<sup>2</sup>, I turn to the metaphor of the committed observer (*spectateur engagé*) that was central to Aron's understanding of political judgment and distinguished his political involvement from that of Sartre and his followers. If Aron brilliantly played the role of a *spectateur engagé* for more than four decades,

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1 For an excellent intellectual portrait of Aron, see Pierre Manent's essay "Raymond Aron - Political Educator," in Raymond Aron, *In Defense of Liberal Reason*, ed. Daniel J. Mahoney (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), pp. 1-23. Raymond Aron's memoirs are another key source of information for any interpreter of his works.

2 For a detailed analysis of Aron's political theory, see Daniel J. Mahoney, *The Liberal Political Science of Raymond Aron* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992); Nicolas Baverez, *Raymond Aron* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993); Stephen Launay, *La pensée politique de Raymond Aron* (Paris: PUF, 1995); Brian Anderson, *Raymond Aron: The Recovery of the Political* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997). A discussion of Aron's "morality of prudence" can be found in Daniel J. Mahoney "Raymond Aron and the Morality of Prudence: A Reconsideration," *Modern Age*, 43 (2001): 243-52. Also worth consulting are the articles on Aron published in *Commentaire*, 28-29 (1985) and *European Journal of Political Theory*, 2 (2003).

he never gave a clear theoretical statement regarding the main characteristics of the “committed observer.” Hence one has to reconstruct the portrait of the latter piece by piece by using scattered insights from Aron’s own books in which he described his own political engagement and reflected on the shortcomings of radical forms of political engagement and irresponsible metaphysics.

None of Aron’s works seems better suited to this task than *Le spectateur engagé* (recently reedited in the United States as *Thinking Politically*), featuring the dialogue between Aron and two younger interlocutors, Dominique Yolton and Jean-Louis Missika. Aron himself expressed a particular liking for this book that was favorably received by the French press in the early 1980s<sup>3</sup>. In addition to this volume, I also use Aron’s *Memoirs, The Opium of the Intellectuals*, and a few important essays such as *Fanaticism, Prudence, and Faith* (republished as an appendix to the 2001 new English edition of the *Opium*), “History and Politics,” and “Three Forms of Historical Intelligibility.”

### French liberalism: an oxymoron?

Arguably, the choice of a French author might surprise given the radical legacy of the French Revolution and the high propensity to extremes displayed by the French over the past three centuries. As Tocqueville once argued in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, France has always been – and, one might add, has remained to this day – 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”<sup>4</sup>. What other country has simultaneously given the world the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizen* and the Terror of 1793? What other country had produced spirits as different as Descartes and Bossuet, Montaigne and Pascal, Rousseau and Constant, Robespierre and Napoleon, Sartre and Aron? In all its incarnations,

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3 For more details, see Baverez, Raymond Aron, pp. 496-500. For the English edition, see Raymond Aron, *Thinking Politically*, eds. Daniel J. Mahoney and Brian Anderson (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997). In commenting on the intellectual profile of the committed observer, I espouse an approach similar to the one used by Michael Oakeshott in his posthumously published book, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism* (1996), in which the issues of moderation and political judgment occupy a central place.

4 Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, edited by François Furet and Françoise Mélonio, trans. Alan S. Kahan, Vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 246.

France emerged as “the most brilliant and dangerous nation of Europe, and the best suited to become by turns an object of admiration, of hatred, of pity, and of terror, but never of indifference”<sup>5</sup>.

“I have never met a Frenchman who was a liberal,” the literary critic Émile Faguet once argued. What seems today to be a mere *boutade* was a commonplace in France a century ago. On both the left and the right, liberal principles were rejected as inadequate or hypocritical, and liberalism was seen as a mere oxymoron or an exotic eccentricity. This attitude has deep roots in French political culture. For example, in the 1830s, Tocqueville declared himself a “liberal of a new kind” and claimed at the same time that the liberal party to which he belonged... did not exist. Much has changed in France in the last three decades of the twentieth century. As a result of a velvet revolution, liberalism became almost overnight a fashionable political ideology, signaling a momentous intellectual change. Leading French political philosophers, historians, and sociologists such as Raymond Aron, François Furet, Pierre Rosanvallon, and Pierre Manent, began drawing upon a rich tradition of nineteenth-century French political thought that had either been ignored or systematically distorted by unsympathetic commentators. Thus France eventually managed to exorcise the specter of its illiberal past and its intellectuals, who once believed that Marxism was the unsurpassable horizon of our times, came to defend traditional liberal values and liberal institutions. The last three decades marked the end of a long tradition of political illiberalism and the birth of a “centrist republic” (Furet).

Nonetheless, in spite of this liberal Renaissance, French liberalism has not fully shed away some of its peculiar features that have made it different from its counterpart across the Channel or the Ocean. The complex legacy of the French Revolution and its internal contradictions explain why French liberals grappled with a particular set of issues and why their solutions were often found to be unorthodox and unconventional when compared to those advanced by English liberals across the Channel or American thinkers. It has been noted that in France, liberal principles such as limited power and the rights of man were rooted in its moment of origin and associated with the “movement of rage” of 1789. While the ideas of French thinkers were reputed for their rich theoretical imagination, their political theories were often found wanting by more pragmatic spirits, concerned with the practical implications of ideas and principles. French ideas and slogans such as the famous

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5 Tocqueville, *The Old Regime*, p. 247.

*Liberté, Fraternité, Égalité* were bold and marvelous creations of the human mind, but they were often used to legitimize political regimes which proved to be inimical to individual freedom and happiness. Too often, French thinkers forsake moderation and opted instead for various forms of radicalism that shunned prudence and displayed a disquieting propensity for excess and radical perfectionism. Where are, one might rhetorically ask, the French equivalents of Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, or James Madison?

As Edouard Laboulaye, a leading nineteenth-century French liberal, once acknowledged, the taste for logic and perfectionism had always characterized French political culture. "We easily go to extremes and thus risk missing the goal. We had more than one opportunity to regret not having held to a *juste milieu*"<sup>6</sup>. French intellectuals put a great emphasis on style and form and paid special attention to the rhetoric of their discourses. A seventeenth-century writer, B at-Louis de Muralt, candidly acknowledged: "Style, whatever it expresses, is an important thing in France. Elsewhere, expressions are born of thoughts ..., here it is the reverse; often it is the expressions that give birth to thoughts"<sup>7</sup>. A century later, Tocqueville conveyed a similar idea in his *Recollections*, in which he argued that the French display an unusual propensity for radicalism by looking for "what is novel and ingenuous rather than for what is true; in preferring the showy to the useful; in showing one's self very sensible to the playing and elocution of the actors without regard to the results of the play; and, lastly, in judging by impressions rather than reasons"<sup>8</sup>.

Time has proved Tocqueville right again and again. In the last century, disenchanted with the "decadent" bourgeois world in which they lived, and thirsting for new certainties that were expected to free them from the shackles of the "inhuman" capitalist world, French intellectuals often indulged in vitriolic critiques of Western liberal democratic regimes and exaggerated the accomplishments of Soviet-style communism. Of course, none of the *bien-pensant* intellectuals moved permanently to Moscow or Beijing to enjoy "live" the marvelous accomplishment of the "actually existent communism."

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6 Eduard Laboulaye, "Introduction," in Benjamin Constant, *Cours de politique constitutionnelle*, ed. E. Laboulaye. Paris: Guillaumin, 1861, p. xlvii.

7 B at-Louis de Muralt as quoted by Tony Judt *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1992, pp. 248-49. The reader will find a comprehensive discussion of the limitations and virtues of French intellectuals in Judt, pp. 229-74 and Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron and the French Twentieth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998, pp. 3-27.

8 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections*, trans. A. Teixeira de Mattos. New York: Meridian, 1959, p. 70.

Instead, they continued to enjoy their leisure in Paris, spent long hours chatting in the pleasant cafés on Boulevard Saint-Michel, and paid occasional visits to their heroes in the East when they became bored by the “unbearable lightness of being” in the decadent capitalist world.

Tony Judt once claimed that France lacks blocks of a genuine liberal political vision such as the emphasis on individual rights or the separation between the public and private sphere. French thinkers often succumbed to the seductions of civic virtue, civic duties, and statism. As Judt argued, the language of rights underwent an important conceptual transformation. From a protective device designed to defend individuals against the encroachment of state institutions it evolved into the basis for justifying the claims, actions, and whims of the authority against its citizens. The enjoyment of civil liberties and rights was linked to the conservative notion of social and political order. Thus abstract or natural rights were displaced in favor of positive and concrete rights that could be forfeited in exceptional or emergency situations. To speak of natural rights or rights against society or about rights against the state interference was never a favorite topic in France. Moreover, the French also displayed a strong propensity toward a strong executive power that in turn engendered a particular type of liberalism *through the state*, not against the state as in the Anglo-American liberal tradition. The habit of looking to the state for assistance was accompanied by a nuanced form of skepticism toward individualism and utilitarianism and a certain distrust of the market.

Finally, in his recent *L'individu effacé ou le paradoxe du libéralisme français*, Lucien Jaume attributed the shortcomings of French liberalism to the alleged domination of a statist type of liberalism over rights-based liberalism. “France,” Jaume argued, “did not have a philosophic resource to think through a liberalism comparable to Locke in England”<sup>9</sup>. French thinkers, Jaume concluded, were too often inclined to speculate on concepts such as the sovereignty of reason or “*gouvernabilité*” and downplayed equally important issues such as individual rights, the economic market, and the separation of powers.

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9 Lucien Jaume, *L'individu effacé ou le paradoxe du libéralisme français*. Paris: Fayard, 1997, p. 14.

### Aron's political moderation

Appearances notwithstanding, the French political tradition offers an excellent case-study to anyone interested in studying the virtues and limitations of political moderation and the limits within which one can be at once an objective spectator and an effective actor. It is precisely because France has had a long record of radicalism in politics that it also developed a certain tradition of political moderation in response to various forms of political extremism. As Ran Halévi demonstrated, moderation became a mean of promoting courageous reforms in eighteenth-century France and those who praised the English constitution used moderation and constitutionalism as powerful tools for criticizing absolute monarchy of Louis XIV and his heirs<sup>10</sup>.

Raymond Aron's unique intellectual trajectory illustrates both the virtues and limitations of political moderation while his writings on the philosophy of history and the relationship between history and politics are a gold mine for any student of political judgment and *phronesis*<sup>11</sup>. It is because he was so attentive to the specific nature of the political that Aron understood what is so peculiar (and difficult) about political judgment. In Aron's view, there is no recipe for good political judgment. Applying principles of rational analysis and logical inference from natural sciences to politics amounts to a serious misunderstanding of the political sphere. In politics it is highly important to know when to act and when to refrain from acting, along with being able to perceive and understand novelty in history. Exceptional circumstances do matter and human actions have many unintended consequences<sup>12</sup>.

Aron was both blessed and condemned to live in the "most brilliant and dangerous nation of Europe" at a point in time when the survival of European civilization itself was in doubt. In many ways, as Aron acknowledged in his memoirs, his writings contained the

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10 Ran Halévi, 'La modération à l'épreuve de l'absolutisme. De l'Ancien Régime à la Révolution française,' *Le Débat*, No. 109, March-April 2000, p. 73.

11 I agree with Richard Ruderman that "prudence is not an altogether satisfactory translation of *phronesis*." While the latter suggests a certain pragmatic posture toward politics, it also has a qualitative component that, according to Aristotle, allows one to live well. For more details, see Richard S. Ruderman, "Aristotle and the Recovery of Political Judgment," *American Political Science Review*, 91 (1997): 409ff.

12 In this regard, Aron followed in the footsteps of Guicciardini, although he was probably unaware of his affinity with the Florentine historian and friend of Machiavelli. In his *Ricordi*, Guicciardini wrote that "if you attempt certain things at the right time, they are easy to accomplish. ... If you undertake them before the time is right, not only will they fail, but they will often become impossible to accomplish even when the time would have been right (Francesco Guicciardini, *Maxims and Reflections* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972], p. 61).

aspirations and doubts "that filled the consciousness of a man who was impregnated by history"<sup>13</sup>. Aron's career and writings teach us important lessons about a particular face of moderation, the committed observer, whose values, choices, and predispositions differ from those of the romantic intellectual eternally dissatisfied with the order of things and always prone to be seduced by broad visions of the world.

At first sight, one might be tempted to say that the position of a committed observer fits best what we usually call the public intellectual who lives half-way between the ivory tower of academia and the bustling space of the agora. Or, it might be argued that Aron's committed observer bears striking similarities with Michael Walzer's connected social critic, in spite of their different political allegiances<sup>14</sup> Aron was highly skeptical of intellectuals rushing to get involved in politics or overzealous to comment on political life. Based on his first-hand experience with his fellow French colleagues who sought to mix Marxism and existentialism in order to create a new ethics of authenticity, Aron argued that it is characteristic of intellectuals in general not to seek to understand the social and political world, its institutions and practices. Instead, what they most often want is to denounce the social and political order in which they live because they feel overwhelmed by its complexity and murkiness. Aron criticized this tendency of 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. He took to task those who, without knowing the basics of economics and sociology, indulged in endless diatribes against the rationalization of the soul and the (bourgeois) enthusiasm for efficiency and productivity and pretended to offer a solution to the alienation of the working classes<sup>15</sup>.

As Aron noted in *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, the limitations of industrial civilization, the power of money, and the price of economic success tend to offend the susceptibilities

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13 Raymond Aron, *Memoirs: Fifty Years of Political Reflection*, trans. George Holloch (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), p. 470.

14 See, for example, Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 38-40.

15 In this regard, Aron's argument bears some affinities with Hayek's or Nozick's explanations for the intellectuals' general hostility to capitalism. In turn, Schumpeter pointed out that "Industrial and commercial activity is essentially un-heroic in the knight's sense - no flourishing of swords about it, not much physical prowess, no chance to gallop the armored horse into the enemy, preferably a heretic or heathen - and the ideology that glorifies the idea of fighting for fighting's sake ... withers in the office among all the columns of figures" (Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* [New York: Harper & Row, 1950], pp. 127-28).



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 in judging the flaws of society<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, the obscurity and compromise inherent in political life offend their aesthetic sensibilities, which can hardly accept that the best is often the enemy of the better. Thus, intellectuals tend to 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”<sup>17</sup>. They prefer to eschew real political responsibility and come to think that their only responsibility is to vituperate, being all too ready to leave the other practical questions to the care of so-called experts whose language they often do not understand and with whom they are not engaged in a sustained dialogue. 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.

### Rediscovering the “political”

What is particularly remarkable in Aron’s works is his lucid and meticulous analysis of the politically pernicious effects of the excess of speculative intelligence, sometimes accompanied by a good dose of “irresponsible metaphysics,” that is often the cause of immoderation and poor political judgment<sup>18</sup>. Three key principles defined Aron’s political outlook. The first is the rejection of any dogmatic interpretation of politics and society. As Aron wrote in his essay “Fanaticism, Prudence and Faith,” any student of politics ought to take into account the plurality of considerations on which political and economic actions depend. In so doing, he must be aware of the inevitable conflict between ideas and principles such as economic growth and equality of justice. Rather than seeking a fictitious harmonization between all these values and principles, responsible politicians must achieve a reconciliation or

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16 On this topic, see Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, eds. Daniel J. Mahoney & Brian Anderson (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001), pp. 213-35.

17 Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 154.

18 Chapter Four of Brian Anderson’s book is entitled “Antinomic Prudence” and offers a nuanced interpretation of Aron’s political moderation (Raymond Aron, pp. 121-68). On this issue, also see Mahoney, *The Liberal Political Science of Raymond Aron*, pp. 92, 111-28, 137-46.

compromise between them and ought to be aware that this solution is only a temporary one<sup>19</sup>. The second key principle is the rejection of any global determinism of history such as Marxist historical materialism that deprives politics of its own autonomy. The third principle concerns the conditions of political action as defined by choice and decision in an environment that is in constant flux and is characterized by uncertainty.

What these principles have in common is the emphasis on the complex nature of the "political," that represents one of the most important contributions of Aron to modern political thought. As already mentioned, Aron claimed that intellectuals tend to distrust politics and often misunderstand or misrepresent the nature of the political sphere. In *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, Aron made a seminal distinction between three types of social criticism that have different agendas and philosophies. The first type is "technical criticism" that suggests practical measures which seek to attenuate the evils of society and regards its limitations as inevitable consequences and constraints of political action. Different from technical criticism are two other types of criticism, moral and ideological, which reject the present society in the name of an imaginary society, whose contours remain after all fuzzy and imprecise<sup>20</sup>. Aron was skeptical toward the last two forms of criticism because in his opinion, they tend to distort political judgment. In his memoirs, Aron candidly acknowledged that he, too, had occasionally practiced his own type of ideological criticism, albeit in a different manner than Sartre and his followers. What Aron particularly disliked was the tendency to sketch out a blueprint of a radically different order against which existing institutions are likely to be found defective. In his view, this type of criticism was highly impressionistic and lacked solid grounding in reality, as did utopian speculations and all forms of "literary politics" that ignore reality, remain at the level of abstract theory, and end up by misunderstanding the political.

In his essay "Three Forms of Historical Intelligibility," Aron went to great length to demonstrate the intrinsic shortcomings of all attempts to find higher forms of intelligibility in history. Such endeavors, he wrote, are doomed to fail because most political matters are uncertain and cannot be decided with the exactitude characteristic of natural sciences. Aron criticized Hegel, Marx, and their followers for their obsession with finding higher forms of intelligibility in history. Aron recognized, however, that it is necessary and possible to search for distinct forms of historical

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19 See, for example, Aron, "Fanaticism, Prudence, and Faith," in *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, p. 346.

20 On this issue, see Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, pp. 210-12 and Aron, *Memoirs*, pp. 214-25.

and political intelligibility that are derived from and linked to particular contexts. But to speak of the “goal of History” as if one were endowed with a mystical vision that would allow him to comprehend this historical totality from a privileged Archimedean point makes little sense<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, this is a dangerous enterprise because it might foster a particular form of fanaticism trying to justify the worst cruelties in the name of noble ideals. Aron’s defense of “probabilistic determinism”<sup>22</sup> was based on his belief that, far from advancing inexorably toward a certain goal, the actual development of history forces the responsible philosopher to take note of the plurality of values and principles underlying human action as well as of the unique nature of each political situation and context.

Aron made clear what the political analyst must take into account in order to grasp the multifaceted nature of politics. This was precisely what the proponents of various forms of political radicalism and irresponsible metaphysics refused to do. To understand the forces at work in political life and be able to make informed judgments, one must pay attention not only to structural factors that limit our freedom but also to contingency and human nature. Here is a revealing passage that sheds light on Aron’s understanding of the prerequisites of political judgment:

One must consider (1) the plurality of goals, from short-term to distant, from tactics to strategy; (2) the actor’s knowledge of the situation, as well as the relative effectiveness of means; ... (3) the nature, lawful or unlawful, praiseworthy or not, of the end or means in relation to religious, mythological, or traditional beliefs; and (4) the duly psychological motivations of the act, which is sometimes appropriate but sometimes apparently irrational with respect to the actor’s objective<sup>23</sup>.

In other words, one must take into account the plurality of goals and perspectives of political actors and must seek to understand the functioning of political and economic institutions such as Parliament, the market, interest groups, and political parties. In turn, this requires an adequate perception of the wide range of available choices for reforming these institutions.

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21 In his essay “The Dawn of Universal History,” Aron wrote: “As for the philosophy of history, whether it derives from Bossuet or Hegel, Marx or Toynbee, it is at best regarded more as a literary than a scientific exercise, fit perhaps for writers but not for respectable thinkers” (Aron, “The Dawn of Universal History,” in *The Dawn of Universal History*, [New York: Basic Books, 2002], p, 463).

22 Raymond Aron, *Politics and History: Selected Essays*, ed. and trans. Miriam B. Conant (New York: The Free Press, 1978), p. 61.

23 Aron, *Politics and History*, pp. 48-49.

While being aware of the importance of rational and scientific analysis, Aron never went so far as to believe, like Hobbes and his contemporary followers, that a political science *more geometrico* would ever be possible and desirable. Aron understood that not all types of claims in political and social life can or must be demonstrated and defended rationally<sup>24</sup>. Moreover, he always searched for the right tone for addressing qualitatively different matters. For example, he insisted that analyzing economic matters requires a different tone than writing about international relations. When addressing economic issues, Aron sought to be clear and factual and avoided any sentimental tone that would have been inappropriate. On political topics, he wrote as a man who observed, reflected, and sought the best solution for the welfare of the entire community. In the end, argued Aron, thinking politically amounts to making a fundamental decision: "To think politically in a society, one must make a fundamental choice. This fundamental choice is either the acceptance of the kind of society in which we live, or its rejection. ... From this fundamental choice flow decisions"<sup>25</sup>.

### Aron's politics of responsibility

Aron justified his allegiance to liberalism (in the European meaning of the term) by resorting to a complex and nuanced sociological analysis of modern society that sought to determine and evaluate critically the economic and social conditions that permit freedom and pluralism to survive in modern society. In so doing, he spent a great deal of time and energy studying various aspects of modern society: economics, social relationships, class relationships, political systems, and relations among nations. He rejected the once famous theory of the convergence of capitalism and communism and believed that capitalist liberal societies could be peacefully reformed in spite of their inherent shortcomings. It will be recalled that Aron wrote in his usually balanced, non-partisan, and moderate style even when treating events that he disliked or disapproved of or when he faced tragic events such as the Algerian crisis<sup>26</sup>. He was aware that anyone

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24 For two interesting and well-informed perspectives on political judgment, see Peter Steinberger, *The Concept of Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 1-88, 281-304, and Ronald Beiner, *Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 1-10, 129-67.

25 Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 44.

26 One such example was the Vichy regime. While clearly rejecting the regime, Aron refused to think in black-and-white terms when judging the degree of guilt of Marshal Pétain. This was certainly not a case of moral indecision on Aron's part; as both a Jew and a French citizen, he could have never endorsed a regime that had in fact been imposed by the Nazis. For more details, see Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 82.

who writes about political crises must always ask the fundamental question: “What would I do if I were in the place of the statesman?”

Furthermore Aron believed that even in difficult times, one can (and ought to) be committed to reason by upholding the idea of a decent society while also being fully aware of the inherent imperfections and antinomies of our political and social world. This idea was Raymond Aron’s guiding principle and pole-star. Although he lived in dark times, Aron retained confidence in rational inquiry and the individuals’ ability to see the difference between illusions, emotions, hopes, and demonstrable truths. He refused to despair of any man, even though his century and contemporaries gave him many reasons to despair<sup>27</sup>. “I was a disciple of Kant,” confessed Aron, “and there is in Kant a concept to which I still subscribe: it is the idea of Reason, an image of a society that would be truly humanized. We can continue to think, or dream or hope - in the light of the idea of Reason - for a humanized society”<sup>28</sup>. Aron’s moderate optimism rested on his awareness of the frailty and fallibility of human condition (did not Kant, after all, speak about the crookedness of human nature?) as well as on recognizing the concrete possibilities for effective and reasonable action in our imperfect world.

While being fully committed to such principles as freedom, pluralism, and rule of law, Aron opposed the dogmatic interpretation of these values and realized that the endorsement of the principles underpinning Western liberal democratic societies was not supposed to be a synonym for complacent conservatism. Although strongly opposed to single-party rule and totalitarianism, Aron was never an ideologue of capitalism like, say, Ayn Rand or Milton Friedman. “I have tried to serve the same values in different circumstances and through different actions,” wrote Aron. “Having political opinions is not a matter of having an ideology once and for all; it is a question of taking the right decisions in changing circumstances”<sup>29</sup>. Our opinions must be based on careful consideration of facts and should take into account the ways in which changing circumstances affect our decisions, strategies, and goals.

His famous critique of freedom as negative liberty is a case in point. It will be recalled that the concept of negative liberty was at the core of the theories of liberty

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<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>29</sup> See *Thinking Politically*, p. 150; for more details on Aron’s method, also see pp. 201, 250. Another interesting text is Aron’s essay, “History and Politics,” originally published in 1949 (an English translation can be found in Aron, *Politics and History*, pp. 237-48).

advanced by European Cold-war liberals such as Berlin, Popper, and Hayek. While agreeing with their general political outlook, Aron did not shy away from showing the inadequacies of the definition of liberty as freedom from interference as the fundamental principle of liberal democratic society. At a point in time when the very notion of citizenship was related to "positive" liberty, Aron who was no friend of totalitarian systems, chose to affirm the importance of citizenship in modern society. "Individuals in a democracy," he argued, "are at once private persons and citizens. What bothers me most is that it seems to me almost impossible in France to have courses in citizenship in the schools. ... Our societies, our democracies, are citizens' countries"<sup>30</sup>. It was this belief that led Aron to emphasize not only the centrality of mores to the sustenance of liberal democracy (a lesson he 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 citizens living in modern liberal democracies<sup>31</sup>.

This view ran against the conception of freedom defended by another prominent twentieth-century liberal and contemporary of Aron, Friedrich von Hayek, who in Aron's opinion, was a "doctrinaire" advocate of economic liberalism. In "Fanaticism, Prudence, and Faith," Aron defined "doctrinairism" as the tendency to attribute universal value to a particular doctrine and considered as one of its manifestations the idea that the principles of the ideal order are identical only with a certain set of institutions<sup>32</sup>. In his 1961 review of Hayek's *Constitution of Liberty*, Aron put forward a different theory of freedom that rejected the idea that a free society is defined only by free elections, the free market, and the rule of law. Aron also believed that a moderate welfare state is not incompatible with political freedom and the rule of law. He expressed reservation toward that tradition of liberal thinking that equates liberty above all with obedience to laws in order to reduce as much as possible the potentially arbitrary control exercised by individuals over their fellow citizens. Liberty, affirmed Aron, depends on the universality of the law, but it is also much *more* than absence of constraint: "All power involves some element of the government of men by men; liberty is not adequately defined by sole reference to the rule of law: the manner in which those who hold this power are

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30 Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 248.

31 On this issue, see Aron's classic two-volume work *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*. A recent English edition has been published by Transactions (1998, 1999).

32 See Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, pp. 332-34. A more elaborate treatment of this topic can be found in chapter 2 ("Formal Freedoms and Real Freedoms") of Aron's *An Essay on Freedom*, tr. Helen Weaver (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 49-99.

chosen, as well as the way in which they exercise it, are felt, in our day, as integral parts of liberty<sup>33</sup>. Liberty and power have a variable character that defines the adequate and historically shifting limits of the individual sphere that must be protected against the interference of the state. The upshot of this view is that there can be no objective, eternally valid definition of constraint, and consequently of liberty, since general rules, too, can sometimes be oppressive in one way or another. Aron believed that for all the brilliance of his analysis, Hayek neglected this point when drawing a radical distinction between obedience to persons (which he equated with unfreedom) and submission to abstract and universal rules (which he equated with freedom)<sup>34</sup>. Interestingly, a similar critique was advanced by Oakeshott, who wrote: "This is, perhaps, the main significance of Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* – not the cogency of his doctrine, but the fact that it is a doctrine. A plan to resist all planning may be better than its opposite, but *it belongs to the same style of politics*"<sup>35</sup>.

Aron's middling, non-dogmatic position is also evidenced by his attitude toward Marx, perhaps the most controversial modern thinker, capable of eliciting either uncritical admiration or outright rejection. Aron carefully read all of Marx's works, in particular *The Capital*, which he regarded as one of the greatest sociological works ever written. In this regard, it can be argued that Aron knew Marx much better than most of his own critics on the Left, who often referred to Marx without having carefully studied his works. Aron never converted to Marxism primarily because he understood early on the internal contradictions of Marx's economic, social, and political thought and could not come up with a solution that would resolve these contradictions<sup>36</sup>. He saw Marxism for what it was, that is a global interpretation of history predicated on two main ideas: the preeminence of class struggle and priority of the relations of production compared to the forces of production. Aron perceptively noted that from the materialistic interpretation of history Marx drew a radical conclusion unsupported by logic or facts:

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33 Aron, *In Defense of Liberal Reason*, p. 85; also see p. 83. For an interpretation of this topic, see Mahoney, *The Liberal Political Science of Raymond Aron*, pp. 73-90.

34 On Aron's attitude toward Hayek, see Mahoney *The Liberal Political Science of Raymond Aron*, pp. 87-88, 118-19.

35 Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 2nd enlarged edition, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), p. 26; emphasis added.

36 For more details on this topic, see Raymond Aron, *Le Marxisme de Marx*, eds. Jean-Claude Cassanova and Christian Bachelier (Paris: Fallois, 2002). Also see Aron's analysis of the future of secular religions in Aron, *The Dawn of Universal History*, pp. 177-202. For a detailed analysis of Aron's critique of Marx, see Mahoney, *The Liberal Political Science of Raymond Aron*, pp. 33-38, 74-80; Mahoney, "Aron, Marx, and Marxism," *European Journal of Political Theory*, 2 (2002): 415-27; and Anderson, *Raymond Aron*, pp. 61-87.

that every progressive spirit must be on the side of the proletariat (the children of the light) in the fight against the bourgeoisie (the children of darkness and forces of evil). The endpoint of history, argued Marx, is socialism and one must embrace it to be on the side of progress. Aron was uncomfortable with this (dogmatic) conclusion because he saw in it a leap of faith that he was not able to make in spite of his appreciation for Marx' genius as a perceptive critic of nineteenth-century capitalism. "After having studied Marxism for almost an entire year," affirmed Aron, "I concluded with regret that, in this form, it was not acceptable. The analysis of history does not permit one to determine the policy to follow and to foresee, as an end result, a society from which contradictions among men would be eliminated... Even today, I am interested in the Marxism of Marx, but not in that of Brezhnev, which is very boring. But Marx's Marxism is very, very interesting"<sup>37</sup>.

The departure from Marx is further illustrated by Aron's nuanced position on determinism and probabilism in history. While refusing to admit that forces of production determine history, he acknowledged the importance of ideas, forces of production, and contingency in determining the course of history. He did not think that this question permits a precise response, but pointed out that the story of mankind is an unfinished and unpredictable one. Every political situation, argued Aron, "always allows for a margin of choice, but the margin is never unlimited"<sup>38</sup>. Hence, he went on, political theorists should attempt to elucidate the goals that societies should pursue as well as the means that they have at their disposal. But they ought to investigate the realm of the possible by also taking into account prior goals, preferences, and principles. To study these goals in a vacuum, concluded Aron, would be absurd because ideas arise out of specific political, cultural, social, and economic contexts that always limit the range of the possible.

Another example of Aron's political judgment was the highly controversial episode of the Algerian independence. This issue had polarized the entire French public opinion and generated sentimental and violent reactions that often made dialogue difficult if not utterly impossible. Aron recognized early on that denying Algeria's independence would be both morally illegitimate and economically unfeasible. Although he was not blind to moral considerations, he defended Algeria's independence on economic rather than moral grounds, without professing loudly his love for humanity or his defense of the independence of the Third World as many others did. Aron foresaw

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37 Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 41.

38 Aron, *Politics and History*, p. 237.



that denying the independence of Algeria would have involved a military and economic commitment that France was unable to sustain at that point in time (the whole decade of the 1950s marked the decline of France's military power). On this topic as on many others, Aron preferred to think *politically* rather than in moral terms and resorted to an ethics of responsibility rather than one of absolute ends. He had a clear sense of proportions: "I based my policy on reality. ... The policy that I recommended could just as easily have been based on moral principles, because they were compatible. ... My purpose was to analyze a political problem in order to demonstrate that a given solution was the least bad. ... the avoidance of a national tragedy, that is, a civil war, depended upon the courage of the politicians"<sup>39</sup>.

The same "politics of understanding" underlay Aron's realist position toward the Munich accords of 1938 and the students' revolts of 1968. While acknowledging that the Munich accords were not honorable, he argued that in terms of *Realpolitik* it is open to discussion whether the opposite approach would have saved lives given Hitler's personal irrational agenda and the balance of power in Europe in the late 1930s. "In any case," opined Aron, "it seems to me unjust and egregious to make a clear-cut distinction between good people and bad people, according to whether they were for or against Munich"<sup>40</sup>. The turbulent events of May 1968 in Paris showed another face of Aron, the trimmer, concerned with keeping the ship on an even keel in times of social and political unrest<sup>41</sup>. Aron found himself isolated between the two camps with which he had strong disagreements, but he realized that the students' revolutionary fervor fueled the discontent of the Parisian workers (who launched a massive strike following the student's demonstrations) and was thus threatening the very foundations of the French Republic. Although Aron's relations with Charles de Gaulle were notoriously ambiguous and tense, during the final week of May 1968 he declared his support for the President when the survival of the regime was threatened by the most radical demonstrators. Aron also rejected the radicalism of Sartre as illustrated by his famous claim that the President had launched a "call for murder"<sup>42</sup>.

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39 Aron, *Thinking Politically*, pp. 162; 164-66; also see pp 170-71. For an analysis of this issue, see Tony Judt, "Introduction," in Aron, *The Dawn of Universal History*, pp. xvii-xx.

40 Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 51.

41 The classical definition of the "trimmer" was given by Halifax in *The Character of a Trimmer*: "This innocent word Trimmer signifieth no more than this: That if Men are together in a boat, and one par of the company would weigh it down on one side, another would make it lean as much to he contrary; it happeneth there is a third Opinion of those, who conceive it would do as well, if the Boat went even, without endangering the passengers" (Halifax, *Complete Works*, ed. J. P. Kenyon [London: Penguin, 1969], p. 50).

42 See Aron, *Memoirs*, pp. 326-28 and Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 209.

Aron commented ironically: "Not even a vulgar demagogue would have used such an expression in reference to General de Gaulle, to a government that had tolerated the 'demos,' the semi-riots that had gone day by day"<sup>43</sup>.

Aron adopted a similar trimming attitude afterwards when he was invited to comment on the governance of the universities. "Whenever I discussed the future or questions of reform at university meetings," remembered Aron, "I was always on the side of the reformers. But as soon as I saw that honorable and decent teachers were being treated in a shabby manner, I defended them. I didn't agree with them, but I defended them"<sup>44</sup>. In spite of his outright rejection of the violent means chosen by demonstrators, Aron acknowledged that the pseudo-revolution of May 1968 also had a few positive unintended effects. French society became more aware of the problems created by low wages, universities were granted greater autonomy, and the predominant views about economic growth were revised.

### The solitary center

Aron's moderation marginalized him in the middle and his balanced and detached position irritated sensibilities on both ends of the political spectrum. 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"<sup>45</sup>. To be sure, Aron paid a lot of attention to the ideas of those who opposed his principles (Sartre was the most famous example). Seeking to promote empathy for others' points of view, Aron attempted to make people understand that those who disagreed with them were not necessarily enemies or traitors. Yet, he was far from successful in this regard. As Aron himself acknowledged, he found himself once again isolated, the usual destiny of an authentic liberal (in the European sense of the word). This was a paradoxical situation, because he spent his entire life going to the Left, while speaking the language of the Right, and going

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43 Aron, *Memoirs*, p. 327.

44 Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 215.

45 The phrase is from Aron's speech on the occasion of his admission to the Institute (Academy of Moral and Political Sciences) in 1965 (apud Baverez, Raymond Aron, p. 338). Also see the following statement of Aron: "My passion for analysis has led me to criticize almost everyone in politics, even including those who, in general terms, think as I do. ... Oddly enough, although I write in moderate terms, it frequently happens that I do so in a wounding way or at least in a way considered irritating" (Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 301).

to the Right, while speaking the language of the Left<sup>46</sup>. Sometimes, for example on the Algerian war, Aron's positions were closer to the Left than to the Right. On Stalinism, he was seen as a man of the Right because he denounced Stalinism and communism in unambiguous terms.

Aron saw himself as an intellectual of a rather peculiar breed and one could say, paraphrasing Tocqueville, that the liberal party to which he belonged did not exist during this time<sup>47</sup>. Aron was rarely in agreement with those he had voted for and the best example was his uneasy relation with Charles de Gaulle. While sharing with the latter the same strong commitment to the values of the French Republic, Aron never became a Gaullist, a confidante of the General upon whom the latter could always rely. Aron went so far as to criticize on more than one occasion what he called a certain form of "Gaullist fanaticism" that went against the main principles of his own philosophy. "To be truly Gaullist," claimed Aron, "it was necessary to have faith in de Gaulle and to be ready to change one's opinions to agree with his. I could not do it, but that didn't prevent me from being André Malraux's *directeur de cabinet*"<sup>48</sup>.

Under the Fifth Republic, Aron's attitude toward de Gaulle was defined by the principle "Solidarity in times of crisis and independence in normal times." While in Aron's view de Gaulle's foreign policy – "*la politique du joyeux célibataire international*," to use Pierre Hassner's words<sup>49</sup> – was sometimes unnecessarily provocative, its main initiatives were in line with the general interests of the French Republic and the free world. At the time of the Liberation, noted Aron, General de Gaulle's government was "much the best and ... it was necessary to support it." A decade later, de Gaulle's return to power, "even though the circumstances were unpleasant, was rather desirable"<sup>50</sup> because, thanks to

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46 See Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 257. The same point was made by a friend of Sartre and critic of Aron, Michel Contat, in an article published in *Le Monde* in 1980: "[Aron] still belongs to the family of the left, and, in a certain sense, this has always been true, even when he joined the opposition, because his arguments are always directed to the left, as though he wanted to remove their blinders" (quoted in Aron, *Memoirs*, p. 460).

47 It is not a mere coincidence that Aron was responsible for the revival of interest in Tocqueville in France in the 1950s. For more details, see the chapter on Tocqueville published in Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, Vol. I, eds. Daniel J. Mahoney and Brian Anderson (New Brunswick: Transactions, 1998), pp. 237-302.

48 Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 101.

49 Pierre Hassner's words were quoted by Pierre Manent in a recent dialogue with Nicolas Baverez, "Raymond Aron, le dernier philosophe des Lumières," published in *Le Figaro*, October 17, 2003 on the occasion of two decades from Aron's death.

50 Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 101.

his prestige, he had a better chance than anyone else to find a solution to the Algerian crisis. As the latter degenerated, the General "had dirtied his hands as little as possible"<sup>51</sup>. Moreover, de Gaulle wished to and fought hard to restore a democratic republic, even if his constitutional plan gave the President the opportunity "to exercise an absolute and limited power"<sup>52</sup>. In Aron's view, he was "a perfect example of the charismatic leader who had "historic ambitions comparable to those of Washington"<sup>53</sup>. In an article published on the first anniversary of de Gaulle's return to power, Aron concluded: "The Fifth Republic exists, and in present-day France, General de Gaulle is the best possible monarch in the least bad of possible governments. He possesses personal power, but he restored the Republic in 1945. He manipulated the 1958 revolution in order to produce an authoritarian republic, not fascism nor a military despotism. He wants to save the remnants of the French empire, but he has granted the territories of black Africa the right to independence"<sup>54</sup>.

If Aron was a moderate of a peculiar breed with a keen sense of intellectual and political independence, he took, however, a firm and clear stance on all the great questions of his time: Fascism, the Soviet Union, decolonization, Algeria, May 1968, the role of the United States in the world, and the famous press conference of de Gaulle on the Jews from 1967 in which he described the Jews as "an elite people, sure of itself and overbearing." That on all these issues Aron was more or less "right" is certainly remarkable given not only the complex nature of political events but also the number of brilliant intellectuals who chose to defend the indefensible (the crimes of Communism). But it would be even more important to try to understand how Aron arrived at his conclusions, what enabled him to take a correct stance when others seemingly failed to do so. To make him an infallible judge would certainly be absurd and would moreover contradict the spirit in which Aron himself conducted his entire public life. At the same time, it would be difficult to deny that he was a far more reliable judge of modern politics and society than Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Kojève, Foucault, and other famous philosophic and literary figures.

Aron's moderation and lucid political judgment played a key role in this regard. He constantly affirmed the superiority of free society over any form of totalitarianism and chose the "preferable" over the "detestable." When really great issues were at stake, when situations arose in which, politically or existentially, it was vital to be on one side or the

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51 Aron, *Memoirs*, p. 255.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 256. The phrase is taken from an article of Aron in which he commented on de Gaulle's constitutional plans. The expression "absolute and limited" comes from Maurras.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 258.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 258.

other, Aron took a firm and lucid stance. His reasoning was surprisingly simple, unencumbered by futile existential anxieties that plagued Sartre's political works: "I have chosen the society that accepts dialogue," remarked Aron. "As far as possible, this dialogue must be reasonable; but it accepts unleashed emotions, it accepts irrationality. ... The other society is founded on the refusal to have confidence in those governed, founded also on the pretension of a minority of oligarchs that they possess the definitive truth for themselves and for the future. I detest that; I have fought it for thirty-five years and I will continue to do so. The pretension of those few oligarchs to possess the truth of history and of the future is intolerable"<sup>55</sup>. He could have never have said, with Merleau-Ponty, that "there is as much 'existentialism' in the stenographic record of the Moscow debates as in all of the works of Koestler." Nor could Aron have ever affirmed, with Francis Jeanson (speaking for Sartre against Camus) that "we are simultaneously against [Soviet Union] and for it"<sup>56</sup>. Aron was unwilling to gloss over the fact that in the name of lofty ideals millions of people were sent to concentrations camps or left to starve. In his eyes, one had to either break with communism or embrace its ideology: *tertium non datur*.

Aron's analysis of the major political events of his time shows that he did not take refuge behind cold or neutral concepts even if, as he once put it, he sometimes took his moderation to excess and hid his passions under his arguments. Instead, he analyzed each situation with a mixture of calm attachment and detachment, reason and passion, without giving arrogant advice of the sort "Let me tell you what you should do." He was aware of his own fallibility and limited knowledge and considered himself a well-informed amateur who did not feel obliged to tell others what they should think or do. As an editorialist for *Le Figaro* for thirty years, he believed that a well-informed journalist must not seek to indoctrinate his readers, but ought to give them at least the basic facts the ministers should also use in making their decisions. When appropriate, he shared with his readers his own beliefs, but he did it with his characteristic "icy clarity"<sup>57</sup> and detached attachment. Last but not least, he realized that he did not possess the qualities necessary to exercise power or to advise princes. Prudent in his writings, he had a difficult time controlling his speech and often found himself incapable of adopting a neutral diplomatic language. What Aron lacked

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55 Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 252.

56 Aron's reference to Merleau-Ponty can be found in Aron, *Memoirs*, p. 215; for his critique of Jeanson's ambiguous position, see p. 221.

57 I borrow this phrase from Judt's *The Burden of Responsibility*.

was a certain capacity for performance that he acknowledged as an important prerequisite of success in politics. As he put it in his memoirs, "Intelligence, knowledge, and judgment are not enough. Performance is also required, of which I would have been most probably incapable"<sup>58</sup>. But is it possible for a committed observer to "perform" in a moderate manner in politics and public life?

### The committed observer

This question prompts us to ask what would be the "right type of intelligence" or the proper mindset of the committed observer that makes one capable of correctly understanding the fundamental antinomies and constraints of political life. Such a person would have to be aware of the general trends of his time and would refuse the temptation to judge absolutely and unconditionally, a position that suits better the prophet than the committed observer. The latter seeks to understand the complexity of political and social phenomena by cherishing it rather than seeking to ignore it or simplify it. The committed observer attempts "to disintoxicate minds and to calm fanaticism, even when it is against the current tendency"<sup>59</sup>. While being aware of the importance of passions, he continues to believe in the power of reason and works to make reasonableness and lucidity triumph even in the midst of terrible events. As such, he is convinced that when it comes to analyzing political phenomena, one must divest oneself of any sentimentality and should strive to be as lucid as possible<sup>60</sup>.

As such, to borrow Weber's famous dichotomy, the committed observer prefers the ethics of responsibility to the ethics of conviction, or to use Aron's own words, he engages in the "*politics of understanding*" as opposed to the "*politics of Reason*" (with "R"). This is not to say that the committed observer distrusts reason *per se* or that he no longer believes in the power of rational inquiry. While acknowledging the virtues of reason, the committed observer resists the temptation of idolizing Reason. His goal is to maximize the presence of reason and moderation in a world dominated by human passions, cruelty, and an eternal competition for scarce resources. The engaged spectator understands that politics involves the inevitable exercise of power for maintaining

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58 Aron, *Memoirs*, p. 476.

59 The phrase belongs to Camus and is taken from Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Modern Library, 1974), p. 121.

60 For more details, see Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 262.

order and security, with all its ensuing risks and costly choices made in an environment fraught with uncertainty and in constant flux. Because he refuses to think of politics as a means of implementing radical reforms or changing human nature, he shuns the idea of government or any one single agency being the chief agent in the pursuit of perfection. Improvement and perfection mean, however, two different things and, as already mentioned, Aron's position was in fact compatible with support of incremental reform<sup>61</sup>.

Like Dr. Rieux in Camus' *The Plague*, the committed observer (as described by Aron) is inclined to say: "Salvation is just too big a word for me. I don't aim so high. I'm concerned with man's health; for me, his health comes first"<sup>62</sup>. His position is characterized by a fundamental modesty that teaches him a sound order of priorities. He seeks to help his fellow citizens understand better their political environment and is committed to "truth and liberty, the love of truth and the horror of lies"<sup>63</sup>. If the committed observer is somewhat detached from the actual game of politics, his is a form of detached attachment because, as Aron points out, he loves his country and puts the survival and security of the community above everything else. That is why when the danger of civil war looms large he does everything in his power to avoid the worst<sup>64</sup>. But, while understanding the importance of order and social peace, the committed observer also grasps that "there is a barbarism of order no less to be avoided than the barbarism of disorder"<sup>65</sup>. He distrusts not only those anarchists who fail to understand the necessary prerequisites of political life in modern society, but also those who praise order only because their view of the world is too narrow.

Above all, the engaged spectator refuses the posture of a seer or prophet. His is not a politics of faith, but, to use Michael Oakeshott's dichotomy, one of skepticism. Those who espouse the politics of faith understand the activity of governing as instrumental in achieving the perfection of social and political order and have almost unlimited confidence in human reason. On the contrary, the proponents of the politics of skepticism

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61 On this issue, also see Michael Oakeshott *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 53. It is worth pointing out that in this respect Aron's liberalism was different from Oakeshott's more conservative stance. Yet, they both shared a certain skepticism that made them immune to any forms of political radicalism.

62 Camus, *The Plague*, p. 17.

63 Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 261.

64 See, for example, the following statement of Aron: "As always in the most difficult situations, I try to find a way to avoid the worst - and the worst thing that can happen to a country, as far as I am concerned, is civil war. ... I was always obsessed with the need to avoid civil war, and I lived in an era when we were always close to it" (*ibid.*, p. 74).

65 I borrow here a phrase from Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism*, p. 35.

view the activity of governing as detached from the pursuit of perfection in this world and claim that the most important aim of politics is to reduce as much as possible the intensity of conflict in the world. This explains why Aron's committed observer does not have the pretension of knowing the future, nor does he claim to know the direction in which mankind will inevitably evolve. He only has a certain imperfect understanding of reality without ever pretending to fully understand it. He tries to remain as close as possible to the facts themselves for fear of being carried away from them and losing sight of reality. He accepts that both the world and the vocabulary with which we try to make sense of it are essentially and irreducibly ambiguous, heterogeneous, and infinitely complex, susceptible of various interpretations.

Hence, the committed observer views with skepticism the initiatives of those who embrace the ethics of absolute ends, who claim to have a clear and infallible knowledge of the future, and make their decisions based on this final station and on what they think necessary to attain this distant goal. Working with a simplified Manichean view of politics, the enthusiast partisans of the politics of faith see themselves as confidants of Providence and have the illusion of knowing the denouement of the drama of history. The committed observer rejects these ambitious claims because he is skeptical toward any vision of politics that has a messianic or soteriological ring.

His commitment, however, is of a particular nature that deserves special attention. To be true to his vocation as *spectateur engagé* he needs both knowledge and judgment, that is to say "knowledge of the polarity of the politics within which he moves, and judgment to recognize the proper occasions and directions of movement"<sup>66</sup>. While being aware of the limits within which one can be at once an objective spectator and an effective actor, the engaged observer believes that objectivity is not at all incompatible with commitment to a set of principles and values<sup>67</sup>. He realizes, however, that these values and principles do not always form a harmonious whole. Hence, what distinguishes his position from that of the romantic type is the ability to grasp and to correctly interpret the antinomies at the heart of human condition and modern society, the inescapable trade-offs that people face in their daily lives. The committed observer distrusts simplicity as well as any attempt to reduce the complexity of social world to a few basic

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>67</sup> Here is a revealing passage from Aron: "I had decided to be a committed observer. To be at one and the same time the observer of history as it was unfolding, to try to be as objective as possible regarding that history, and to be not totally detached from it - in other words, to be committed. I wanted to combine the dual role of actor and spectator" (Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 257).



elements that would fit our black-and-white categories and concepts. In order to grasp the inevitable constraints of social and political world, he studies not only the ideas, choices, and actions of real political actors but also the institutions that shape and limit their actions. He acknowledges that “when one analyzes present-day societies, one is so aware of the constraints that weigh as much on those who govern as on those governed that it is difficult to dream or invent as you suggest”<sup>68</sup>.

Hence, when acting in an environment that does not fit his categories and concepts, the committed observer does not seek refuge in the comfort of an imaginary perfect society. He is not bothered by the nuances of gray that characterize the political sphere; on the contrary, he believes that gray, too, can be beautiful under certain circumstances. That is why he does not aspire to angelic purity<sup>69</sup> and does not dream of building a world purified of all traces of impurity or evil. He acknowledges that the relationship between politics and morality is a notoriously difficult one that cannot be properly studied by borrowing and applying concepts from ethics in a rigorous manner. Moreover, he admits that even “political thought is essentially impure, equivocal”<sup>70</sup> and must remain so. Because politics involves constraint and a certain level of violence, it combines elements of morality and immorality in such a way that it makes often difficult to apply an unambiguous criterion for deciding upon the best course of action. Hence, the committed observer admits that political activity is by nature impure and cannot always be judged against the precepts of Christian morality; in other words, “politics is not coterminous with the activities of good Samaritans”<sup>71</sup>.

Above all, the engaged spectator as described by Aron is aware that “politics is never a conflict between good and evil, but always a choice between the preferable and the detestable”<sup>72</sup>. That is why he rejects perfectionism in unambiguous terms: “In political affairs, it is impossible to demonstrate truth, but one can try, on the basis of what one knows, to make sensible decisions”<sup>73</sup>. He recognizes that in times of great misfortunes, even truth may be “prosaic and insufferable”<sup>74</sup>. Sometimes, he is not afraid of relying on intuition rather than on incontestable facts<sup>75</sup>. He does not ask

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68 Ibid., p. 251.

69 “I have never aspired to angelic purity, otherwise I have renounced studying political matters” (ibid., p. 242).

70 The phrase is taken from Aron, *Politics and History*, p. 237.

71 Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 244; also see p. 33.

72 Ibid., p. 242.

73 Ibid., p. 264.

74 Ibid., p. 82.

which ideology is appropriate in each case, but ponders what should one do to save the state from ruin if one were at the helm of the state. He refuses to think in terms of black-and-white categories and does not see the world through ideological blinders that inevitably end up distorting the facts themselves. On the contrary, he prefers to *explain* reality and its contradictory facts rather than reinvent them. Respect for facts is a supreme value for the committed observer. In the name of realism, he rejects cheap tirades of indignation and vituperation that might cloud or affect his perception of reality. His reasoning is simple and straightforward: if a political system causes in reality the suffering of millions of individuals, this is an undeniable fact that unambiguously condemns it in the face of history.

Despite his image as a hesitant spirit, the engaged spectator (again, as described by Aron) is capable, however, of espousing firm positions and making clear decisions. He is not neutral when neutrality is inappropriate and is not afraid of recommending tough measures when circumstances require them. But he is not likely to rush to act even when he has the determination to see and to seize upon truth and reality. While being aware that "to think politically in a society one must make a fundamental choice"<sup>76</sup>, his motto remains "neither Dionysius nor Apollo, but each in his place and season"<sup>77</sup>. In other words, although his judgment closely follows specific events, it is not entirely driven by them. On the contrary, it is integrated into a larger vision that ensures that his choices are based not on wishful thinking, but on a realistic assessment of each particular situation. He has the ambition to form his own viewpoint on the main issues of the day and refuses to embrace the ideas held by others without first questioning their accuracy.

It is the almost religious respect for facts that explains why the committed observer is neither a political activist nor a moralist. He does not find difficult to accept that other people's arguments are as plausible as his own opinions and refuses to believe that those who disagree with him do not have a moral stance worth respecting. But the engaged spectator is not a mere pragmatist either. If he pays due respect to facts, he does not idolize them either. Moreover, he does not believe that political action is a mere game or an arena for expressing personal preferences and choices that are equally valuable. His tone is often sharp and critical. He does not shy away from

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<sup>75</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>77</sup> I borrow this phrase from Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism*, p. 124.

criticizing those in power when making serious mistakes, nor is he reluctant to criticize those in opposition when they are in error. Nonetheless, he has the unfair reputation for being someone who analyzes and dissects facts (*ad nauseam*) with an icy clarity and “dramatic dryness,” that is to say someone who does not take sides and rarely puts forward helpful solutions<sup>78</sup>.

Finally, the committed observer refuses to overemphasize that politics is Manichean. He is aware that nothing is so evil that it does not contain some good, just as nothing is so good that it does not contain some evil. No choice is clear, perfect, or cost-free, and every decision requires careful thinking and evaluation of alternative paths. That is why his sober style does not seek for cheap rhetorical victories and retains a certain decency of expression that prevents him from being carried away by temporary emotions that he would later regret. His conduct is guided by the belief that it is neither his habit nor his duty to make strong moral judgments of other people, even if he is allowed to register his moral disagreement with their ideas and principles.

What is of paramount importance is that the committed observer as described by Aron refuses to consider himself a moral authority entitled to give lessons to his fellow citizens. His rejection of any moral posturing is also motivated by his own self-doubt and self-questioning that are the sources of his modesty. While acknowledging the need for difficult and costly trade-offs in politics, he is perfectly aware that there are rarely heroes on one side and villains on the other. Because he believes that there has always been in politics a mixture of heroism and cruelty, saints and monsters, progress and reaction, reason and passions, he seeks to work with what is given rather than attempting to reform the world according to a utopian or perfectionist blueprint. As a moderate, the engaged spectator understands and accepts that liberal democracy is by nature an “eternal imperfection, a mixture of sinfulness, saintliness, and monkey business”<sup>79</sup>, a regime that, in spite of its patent shortcomings, is capable of improvement and needs constant nurturing. Furthermore, the moderate committed observer does not believe in the existence of a general sense of history, yet he retains a certain degree of optimism and believes that there still remains a certain degree of maneuver and liberty even in the face of adverse circumstances. He accepts the fact that there is no

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78 A phrase from Aron’s dialogue with Wolton is revealing in this regard. “You make choices,” argued Wolton, “but you give the impression of not adhering to them” (Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 81). I borrow the phrase “dramatic dryness” from Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, p. 344.

79 I borrow the phrase from Adam Michnik, *Letters from Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 326. On this issue, also see Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 263.

progress without a negative side and seeks to give due consideration to both the bright and dark sides of progress, while remaining a moderate and unbiased advocate of piecemeal reform.

More importantly, the committed observer does not deduce the desirable solutions from a body of first principles laid down once and forever. Instead, he applies discretion and considers each problem separately, step by step, taking inspiration sometimes from history, sometimes from theory, experience, and the discussions with his fellow citizens<sup>80</sup>. Sound political judgment requires the capacity to understand the unique nature of political phenomena and actors' intentions. The committed observer knows that it is a great error to speak of political things "absolutely and indiscriminately and to deal with them, as it were, by the book"<sup>81</sup>. Instead, he insists that in nearly all things one must make prudent distinctions and exceptions because circumstances change and new circumstances always require new approaches. To judge by the book would amount to a serious misunderstanding of political life, because every tiny difference in each case always has significant, large-scale effects. Or, to discern these small differences requires a perspicacious eye and sound discernment, since political affairs cannot be judged from an Archimedian point away from the sound and fury of the world, but ought to be resolved and considered day by day, step by step, here and now.

### **An Aronian school of moderation?**

By examining Aron's writings we have seen a moderate mind at work navigating prudently between the ideological temptations of his times. Starting from the assumption that politics is rarely to be described in Manichean terms, Aron understood that political life is characterized by choices between what is preferable and what is detestable rather than between good and evil. In this regard, he was a much more reliable political guide than many of his contemporaries who embraced various forms of political radicalism and succumbed all too easily to the charming songs of sirens, left or right.

Aron's writings contain important reflections on the chief task of the political philosopher in modern society. By remaining nonpartisan, he must seek to moderate the always overheated and biased positions of political actors and must do his best to prevent

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80 See Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 303.

81 Guicciardini, *Maxims and Reflexions*, p. 42.

the outbreak of civil war. Through his own moderation and balanced judgment, he must also attempt to contribute to the civic education of his fellow citizens, as was the case with ancient political philosophers<sup>82</sup>. A responsible political philosopher does not always have the possibility of acting efficiently, but he is always expected to speak out against injustice in unambiguous terms:

Whether he meditates on the world or engages in action, whether he teaches obedience to laws or respect for authentic values, whether he urges revolt or encourages persistent effort toward reform, the philosopher fulfills his calling inside and outside of the polity, sharing the risks but not the illusions of his chosen party. He would cease to deserve the name of philosopher only on the day that he came to share the fanaticism or skepticism of ideologues, the day he subscribed to inquisition by theologian-judges. No one can blame him for using the language of those in power if it is the price of his survival. ... But if he turns away from the search for truth or encourages the mindless to believe that they hold the ultimate truth, then he abjures his calling. The philosopher no longer exists - only the technician or the ideologue<sup>83</sup>.

In many ways, this passage accounts for Aron's own intellectual trajectory that, in turn, leads us to ask if there is there a school of moderation and if moderates, marginalized in the middle, can ever have disciples. At first glance, one might argue that there is no Aronian school of thought. It will be recalled that many Frenchmen believed that it was better to be wrong with Sartre than right with Aron. As Nicolas Baverez pointed out, there is no doctrine associated with Aron's name<sup>84</sup>, a fact confirmed by Aron himself. "In adopting certain positions," he once said, "I have been a man very much alone in the face of history"<sup>85</sup>. His intellectual trajectory shows that the practice of moderation can lead to a peculiar form of exile. Yet, although the moderate is not destined to be the leader of any sect, he is perhaps in the best position to teach us how to love freedom and democracy well. This point

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82 For a classical view, see Strauss' essay "On Classical Political Philosophy," in Leo Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy. Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), pp. 59-80.

83 Aron, *Politics and History*, p. 259.

84 Nicolas Baverez and Pierre Manent, "Raymond Aron, le dernier philosophe des Lumières," published in *Le Figaro*, October 17, 2003.

85 Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 253.

was clearly made by Etienne Mantout who once told Aron: "You have shown us ... that one can admire democracy without failing to recognize its faults, that one can love liberty without being sentimental, and that 'he who loves well punishes well'"<sup>86</sup>. Yet, it is undeniable that Aron's ideas influenced an important number of friends and disciples who had subsequently risen to positions of political prominence in France<sup>87</sup>. The fact that political luminaries such as Henry Kissinger and Charles de Gaulle paid heed to Aron's analyses is another proof of the enduring significance of his works.

Aron was aware of the antinomies, paradoxes and tragic choices in politics and understood that some conflicts are irreconcilable, require firm decisions, and may sometimes have tragic and unintended consequences. Among the clearly identifiable features of Aron's moderation are: reason, prudence, perceptive understanding of the antinomies<sup>88</sup> of the political sphere, rejection of political prophecy, opposition to determinism, and a distrust of any form of moral posturing. The committed observer strives to have a good knowledge of history, grasps the irreducibly complex nature of politics, and is aware not only of the tragic nature of political events but also of the inevitable plurality of social, moral, and political values and goods. The ideal proposed by the Aronian tradition of moderation is the political philosopher who understands well the seminal role played by passions in politics and is convinced that "to reflect upon politics, one must be as rational as possible, but to be active in them, one must inevitably play upon the emotions of other men"<sup>89</sup>. He also has the ability to understand the way others think because, as a critical thinker, he remains independent and detached. As such, Aronian skepticism designates a form of philosophical reflection on politics that does not let the intellectuals' characteristic romantic (or utopian) attitude toward politics to get the better of their sense of reality.

To conclude, it is Aron's moderation that makes him relevant today, in an eclectic age when doctrines and ideas are again mixed, after having lost their previous sharp

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86 Ibid., p. 346.

87 The creation of the Raymond Aron Center of Political Research at the prestigious École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris illustrates the enduring influence of Aron's works. This institution has been at the center of the "new French thought" in the 1980s. Among the best known representatives of this trend are Pierre Manent, Alain Besançon, Pierre Rosanvallon, and Marcel Gauchet.

88 On this issue, see Anderson, Raymond Aron, pp. 139, 170-72.

89 Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 33.

contours and identities. The age of extremes, one can hope, is over, and with it also disappears the notion of politics as the pursuit of certainty. The principles of liberal democracy properly understood can immunize the body politic against the seductions of perfectionism and the tyranny of abstractions in politics. Yet, because of their many imperfections, to love liberty and democracy well or, to put it differently, to fall in love with the subtle beauty of gray, is no easy task. It demands not only passion, but also moderation and prudence. Modern society, Aron once argued, must be analyzed and appreciated for what it is worth, without unjustified enthusiasm or utter indignation that would affect one's vision and understanding. If Raymond Aron's works are of interest to today's readers, it is because of his belief that one must remain constantly vigilant to limit the intensity of political conflict and to preserve and nurture the pluralism of ideas, principles, and interests that are essential to freedom in modern society.