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Raymond Aron: last of the liberals

by *Allan Bloom*

A few weeks ago, when I was in Paris, I went to have lunch at my friend Jean-Claude Casanova's home. As I entered the great doors of the building on the Boulevard St. Michel, I had one of those experiences which only an American amateur of things French would call Proustian. I felt a sudden shock, a powerful awareness of an absence linked to the entire substance of my adult life. I recognized that this was where Raymond Aron had lived and that I would find him there no longer.

I could not pretend to be his student or his friend, but he was the teacher and friend of all my friends, admired by everyone I admired on both sides of the Atlantic. He was the protective tent under which we lived, the urbane and always benevolent defender of reason, freedom, and decency when all these were passing through unprecedented crises. He incarnated the *bon sens* which is supposed to be the leading characteristic of liberal democracy and assumed the responsibility for presenting and representing that *political* possibility. He interpreted liberal democracy's purposes, outlined the threats to it, and continually discussed the strategies required to protect us from them. He had

the broadest views and used them to guide his study of the remote details required for policy. His disappearance is equivalent to the loss of the framework in which we lived, believing it was permanent.

Aron (1905-1983) was a member in good standing of that last generation of French writers who by right of inheritance—a right extending back more than three hundred years—commanded the attention of the whole world. But he was at its edge, distancing himself from it and kept at a distance by it. He was more of an observer than a psychagogue; and he was passionately dedicated to liberal democracy, when all the charm seemed to belong to its enemies on the Right and the Left. He too drank at the same trough of German thought as did his contemporaries, but he reasoned about it, whereas they were more concerned with its emotive power. Thus he was more of a scholar than they, and more of a journalist, separating the two aspects of his activity rather than fusing them.

Aron began as a professor and became a political commentator during World War II when he was one of the editors of *La France Libre* in London. Afterwards his academic career led him to professorships at the École Nationale des Sciences Politiques, the Sorbonne, the École Pratique des Hautes Études, and the Collège de France. At the same time he became the regular political columnist of the *Figaro*, where he remained for more than thirty years. Of those famous Paris intellectuals, he was the only one who was really a teacher, committed to his students and accessible to them. He published countless books, twenty-six of them translated into English. Among the better known are *Peace and War; A Theory of International Relations; The Opium of the Intellectuals; Clausewitz, Philosopher of War;* and *The Imperial Republic: The United States and The World, 1945-1973.*

Because Aron was out of step with the fashions, he was more influential in foreign academic circles, as sociologist, political scientist, and philosopher, than he was in France, and his views on the political scene were more attended to by practitioners in the United States, England, and Germany than they were at home. There, his was a lonely voice until, near the end of his life, French intellectuals began to recover from their long affair with the Left and discovered that one of their great thinkers still remained and that he could give them guidance and inspiration. An extraordinary series of television interviews in 1981 (published in the United States under the title *The Committed Observer*) suddenly made him fashionable in the grand Parisian style, a position he did not seek, but one which vindicated his solitary dedication to the truth as he saw it. His teaching contributed to the formation of a new conservatism in France and the United States dedicated to the high ideals of reason and freedom which were the essence of the old liberalism he represented.

For me, personally, he was the man who for fifty years—that is, my entire life—had been right about the political alternatives actually available to us, who had seen the real possibilities and faced them intransigently against all the prevailing temptations. This means, simply, that he was right about Hitler and right about Stalin and right that our Western regimes, with all their flaws, are the best and only hope of mankind. On the big questions he was always right and about the daily or emergent ones as often right as anyone is likely to be.^[1] And he attempted to meet the intellectual challenges posed by the currents of thought hostile to liberal democracy. I could go to him for support and clarification in a world where such sureness of touch is almost nonexistent. In all of this he resisted the modes and did so without doctrinairism or indignation. He was a Frenchman who understood America,

really understood America. And, although he was temperamentally attuned to the universal, Enlightenment strand of French thought, he knew that the intellectual world which liberal democracy was committed to defending contained much more than Cartesian rationalism. He was therefore a perfect link between an American and that old culture which is essential for Americans if their horizon is not to be utterly impoverished and which is ever harder for them to experience.[2]

When I was a young professor at Cornell University, Aron came to deliver an important lecture. My study, political philosophy, was much despised as old-fashioned and unscientific by the authorities and notables of that institution. But Aron, the famous European social scientist, the expositor of Weber, was the object of fervid respect. A large part of his lecture was devoted to an exhortation to American social scientists to relax their “value-free” stance, to study ends philosophically, warning them that if they did not do so they risked losing the one thing most needful. Aron said these things on that occasion for my sake and because they are true. How could I help but love him? He was good, and he was my benefactor.

All of this came back to me as I passed through the portal of that building. Much of that great mass of good luck I call my education could find its focus in Aron, and it then expressed itself in a mixture of desolation and delight. It is my belief that one honors one’s betters by keeping silent about them, but memory and piety demand a few words about this man.

In reflecting on Aron two salient facts insistently present themselves. He was political, and he was really a liberal.

The extent to which Aron represented the political was impressed on me a long time ago when I was having one of my periodic visits with Kojève at the Economics Ministry. The great Hegelian, the spokesman for the end of history who had unraveled history's hieroglyphs, was unusually agitated that day because the Fourth Republic was traversing one of its many crises. Finally he announced, "I must call Aron." It was the only time I ever heard him express the need for enlightenment from another. It occurred to me that he was admitting that history is ongoing, that his *science* had to give way to *prudence*, a faculty for which there was hardly a category left in modern thought. Maybe Lenin's character was as important for the Russian Revolution as were the various determinisms of matter or spirit which fascinate the contemporary mind and drown human freedom or indeterminacy in great permanent necessities. Aron, out of his naive and generous respect for philosophy, regarded Kojève as his superior (and Kojève was indeed an intelligence of a very high order). But Aron possessed a gift and a taste which were lacking to almost everyone else of his generation. The real activities of rulers and their decisions provided the ineluctable focus for his vision. What is in the power of men to do and what they look to in doing it were what he could not avoid being concerned with. For him the issue of our time was the opposition between Western freedom and Soviet tyranny. Anyone who tried to avoid this harsh opposition, repairing to the trans- or sub-political, was avoiding reality, which is naturally political. The political is the comprehensive order in which human aspirations for the good and the noble are actualized. It is the practical decisions of acting men which are most interesting and most revealing of human nature.

It has long been taught that politics is a superficial phenomenon and that its actors are secondary beings, with the possible exception of the extreme leaders of revolutions. Artists and intellectuals, at a remove from the position and perspective of statesmen, have been regarded as proper interpreters of politics. This is particularly true of France, and Axon's friends—for example, Sartre and Malraux—were exemplary of this viewpoint. He always sought to understand them and even to be like them. But he could not. It is not so much that ideological politics are from his point of view ideological, it is that they are not politics. They are, to employ Mann's self-description, unpolitical politics. Politics mean the governance of man and that can only be done from positions of legitimate power. The thinker must be really an advisor of princes or an enlightener of the voting public—he must adopt their perspective—if he is to be of any use or understand the nature of the political beast. The distinction between realist and idealist is not applicable here. There is excitement and moral dignity aplenty in real political life. Aron was not a realist and never adopted abstract poses such as that of power politics. Morality is inherent in politics, but one must always begin from the real situation and goals of the political actors—how one gets from here to there. Therefore, much of his writing was devoted to describing political reasoning and what stands in the way of it in our days. He was not the man to use language like alienation, domination, self-assertion, or anything of the kind. He was constitutionally incapable of talking like that in a persuasive manner, and what he did talk about was frequently boring to people who are not truly political, who do not recognize the special character of political life, who are not enthused by “who's in and who's out,” by the day-to-day observation of political detail.

I believe that it often troubled Aron that his language did not have the same resonance as did that of men like Sartre. But he was an object lesson in real responsibility to them, and he pointed toward a world deeper and more exciting than the one they inhabited. It was a rare triumph of character for Aron alone to stick by his political insight when success and esteem lay elsewhere and while others whom he knew captured the imagination of a generation. He did what he had to do, not always sure that it was the most profound thing to do, often wondering whether modern writers or philosophers were not more gifted than he. But in the long run, the one that counts, he was more useful than any of them in helping us to understand our situation.

And I do not mean that he was useful only in the sense of day-to-day guidance in the practice of domestic and international politics. It is in the realm of theory that the political has been most effectively banished. Politics as a distinctive dimension of human life, not to speak of its being the most important one, has become extremely doubtful. It has been reduced or swallowed up by other disciplines which explain it away. Economics, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, among others, claim primacy over political science. Modern abstract notions like the market, culture, society, or the unconscious take the place of the political regime as the prime cause of what counts for human beings. Older views either denied the real existence of such things as cultures or claimed that the political is their central cause rather than their effect. Aron, honest man that he was, took every academic claim seriously, but he obviously yawned when anthropologists presented their interpretations of things because those interpretations are so far removed from the common sense of life and because they ask us to concentrate on things like art styles, when freedom and peace are what we

really should care about. Economists attracted his attention, but only to the extent that their theories are related to the real lives of nations and help to explain freedom or its opposite. He could never believe that the economic model of man exhausted man or that economic interest is the only kind of interest. He was in the tradition of political economy and understood Adam Smith better than did the economists who cut their science loose from its political moorings. He loved history but real history, that is political history, and he yawned, against his will, at economic, social, and intellectual history, just as he yawned at cultural anthropology. He called himself a sociologist, but it was political sociology if it was anything.

As I have said, Aron's instinct was strong, and he followed it against all that has been academically powerful, and sometimes he was not fully conscious of the unerring aim of that instinct. He visited Germany as a young man. He immediately appreciated the enormity of what was unfolding there, and at the same time he was one of the first Frenchmen to fall under the influence or recognize the stature of Edmund Husserl and Max Weber. He was always alive to what was going on. But he used his experiences to his own ends. What he saw in German politics made him aware of how high the stakes in modern politics were to be and provided the impulse for his lifelong vocation of saving reason and freedom from the wreckage provoked by the new tyrannies. And these intellectual influences freed him from French academicism and certain deterministic abstractions. Phenomenology permits one to look at the world as it is without excessive reductionisms, and this gave support to Aron's natural penchant. Weber provided him with a way of looking at acting men as possibly self-determining and irreducible to the usually adduced determinants, and with arguments for the dignity and possibility of science against the background of a growing philosophically

founded irrationalism. But I never saw any signs that he shared Weber's pathos, his sympathy for the irrationally committed, his anguish at the struggle of the gods. It was not that Aron was unaware of the abyss opening beneath our feet. But he really belonged to an older tradition of rationalism. He worked stolidly within the limits of the politically given and encouraged the use of statesmanlike prudence, which is neither bureaucratic rationality nor quasi-religious commitment. He knew, sadly, that the good regimes could lose, but one must do one's duty, be a good citizen of the city of God, and save one's anguish for oneself.

I would call Raymond Aron a political scientist, although I believe that he never held a chair in that discipline. I mean by political science what Aristotle meant by it, the architectonic science to which the other social sciences are ancillary or ministerial. This view is founded on the premise that man is by nature a political animal, and that politics is a dimension of his being and not a derivative of sub-political forces. According to this political science, the love of justice and glory are as primary as hunger or sexual desire, or, to refer to the latest trends, as awe before the sacred. Politics precedes ethics or psychology and can be looked at on its own grounds. The most distinctive thing about man is that he establishes regimes which claim to be just and sets down laws in accordance with them. The authoritative horizon established by these laws is derivative from nothing other than the intention or will of men. The oldest school of philosophy argued that this is *the* beginning, not only for political philosophy, but for philosophy *tout court*. This is the ground for the study and practice of politics which has collapsed. I do not argue that Aron re-established that ground. But, somehow, he stood firmly on it, and his life was an embodiment of the political possibility. He gave encouragement to those who had instincts similar to his to come out of the

closet and showed them how to cultivate and use such instincts. What unites and gives health to the extraordinarily diverse persons who clustered around his protective example is the sharing of that will-o'-the-wisp, the political instinct.

Raymond Aron was a liberal, and as my title somberly suggests, I fear that he was the last great representative of the breed. I mean that he was persuaded of the truth of the theory of liberalism, that for him its practice was not only the best available alternative but the best simply, and that his personality fully accorded with his liberal beliefs. He lived—and probably would have died for—the strange spiritual asceticism, one of the most arduous of asceticisms, which consists in believing in the right of others to think as they please. It is one thing to die for one's god or one's country, another to die for the protection of the opinions of others which one does not share. The mutual respect of rights, a curious secondary kind of respect, is the essence of liberal conviction. And that respect, as the one absolute of civil society, is in reality very rare and becomes ever rarer. Aron really possessed it. He was never a conservative in any possible sense of the term, whether one looks to Burke, Hegel, de Maistre, or Milton Friedman to define it. Whatever in him may have appeared conservative to radicals of one kind or another had to do with his defense of the essential rights, and the form of government founded on and protective of them, against previously unseen theoretical and practical threats from Left and Right.

Aron's liberalism was that of Locke, Montesquieu, John Stuart Mill and, to some extent, Tocqueville. I make this qualification for the last named thinker, for I never saw in Aron a sense that anything truly important might have

been lost with the passing of aristocracy. He, of course, knew all the arguments. After all he was an educated Frenchman. But he believed that the heights are accessible within well-constituted democratic regimes.

The creed of liberalism consists in the belief in the natural freedom and equality of all men and, following therefrom, that they have natural, inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of property; that they possess reason to recognize those rights and to construct governments; that government is legitimated only by the consent of the governed. Bound up with this is a conviction that there can be a progress of science, that science dispels the illusions which breed fanaticism and allow for the rule of priests, and that science will “ease man’s estate.” In short, Enlightenment is possible and good. Aron really respected man as man. Race, nation or religion never were decisive for human worth as far as he was concerned; the first was for him essentially irrelevant, and the other two were in principle matters of choice not fatality. He was more cosmopolitan than national, more attached to the universal principles of science than to any culture or religion. None of this was simple-minded in him. He knew the differences of nations and the importance of roots. He recognized that liberal democracy was a rare achievement, one that required severe moral prerequisites. But he never doubted that it was *the* achievement nor did he regard it as belonging to one particular race or tradition. In historical and cultural difference, of which he had a rich awareness, he always discerned the primacy of the unity of human nature and the common aspirations for peace, prosperity, and a just political order. All this contributed to his amazing combination of sobriety and humanity, his unfailing civility and his openness toward all opinions and the men who held them so long as they themselves were civil. The corrosive

passions were almost totally absent from him although he lived in times when they were dominant all around him. He was not a hater although he was a partisan.

He knew that liberal democracy begins from selfish interests, but he also knew that those interests can be sublimated into a sense of common interest founded on our common suffering. He never gave in to the base interpretations of liberal society so popular among social scientists, not only because they are ignoble but also because they are not true. The liberal democracies are delicate mixtures of high and low, and as it is merely edifying to recognize only the high, it is a distortion to speak only of the low. He saw that men seek the common good but are often prevented from attaining it by their private interests. He was fully aware that there were moments of utter folly in democracies, but he never doubted their right to folly or contemplated favoring forms of government not based on consent.

In short, Raymond Aron was a perfect *bourgeois*. I use the term invented by liberal democracy's critics and enemies to describe the kind of man typical of it. He was reasonable, immune to the great romantic longings in the light of which the present is denigrated and sensible calculation about the future is made to appear small-minded. Such a man is a reflective rather than a passionate patriot, a good husband and father whose attachment to the smaller community attaches him more securely to the larger one, and, above all, he believes in the liberating power of education.

And this last is one of the most striking facts about Raymond Aron. He believed in an education that never ceases, an opportunity to look in the company of friends at life and the events around one in the light of

philosophy, science, history, and literature. Democracy was for him the freedom of the mind to learn one's rights and one's duties for oneself, the overthrowing of old authority and the discovery of the independent truth. It is amazing the extent to which he remained a Normalian all his life, with a schoolboy's enthusiasm. He was very grateful for the opportunity which the *École Normale Supérieure* provided him. "La carrière ouverte aux talents" seemed just about right to him: a high-class education offered to anyone for free if he were able to profit from it, regardless of race, class, religion, or even nation. This education was, he was convinced, good for the community and good for its recipients. At the *École Normale* he learned the best there has been, and his friends were the best there were. Throughout his life he remained fascinated by his school companions, Sartre and Nizan, and thought his confrontation with them was a privilege and a permanent inspiration. The *École Normale* was a perfect union of the apparently conflicting demands of equality and the right to develop unequal natural gifts. Aron was quite aware that his intelligence and education were superior, but he was certain that this served the common good and that such superiority did not detract from the equal worth of all men based on their capacity for free moral choice. This set of delicately balanced convictions made possible his liberal consciousness.

Because the university was so personally dear to him, but far more because he knew that the university is the central institution in democratic society, he took a very strong stand against the wave of destruction which swept through the Western universities in the 1960s. The university is, or rather was, the substantial presence of the reason on which liberal democracy rests. If there is no reliance on, cultivation of, or respect for dispassionate reason, the rational rights which are all in all in modern democracy will wither away.

The installation of the gutter in the halls of the university disgusted him. The loss of the tradition which was a source of vitality saddened him. The demagogic skewing of the only institution devoted to objectivity frightened him. If democracy cannot tolerate the presence of the highest standards of learning, then democracy itself becomes questionable. His reaction to the university crisis epitomized all that he was, and he was an ardent lover of the freedom of thought and the kind of society which encouraged it. The greatest sign of the decay of liberalism was the acquiescence of most people who called themselves liberal in the savaging of the university.

Aron was the representative of a spirit that dominated the political scene for a long time and that animated the regimes in which we live and which most of us wish to defend. They were founded and sustained at the peaks by men who believed in their principles. The politics of our time, the politics of which Aron was the committed observer, are totally dominated by the threats to liberal democracy from movements and regimes defined almost exclusively by their deadly hatred of liberal democracy. Fascism and Communism agree about their enemy, "bourgeois society." And they both agree that "rights" are "bourgeois rights." Both identify "capitalism" with "bourgeois society," and characterize the latter as the realm of selfishness, individualism, and vulgar materialism. Communism denies that reason can be free in bourgeois society; fascism insists that reason is what is wrong with bourgeois society and intends to replace it with passion. Both, therefore, take away liberal democracy's rational legitimacy. And both dismiss the homely morality claimed for mutual recognition of the rights of man, insisting that it is only enlightened self-interest.

Behind these movements is the most powerful thought of the last two centuries. Not since Kant has liberalism had the support of philosophy, whereas the enemies of liberalism can have the blessing of Marx and Nietzsche among others. All of this has rubbed off on most of us in one way or another. Hardly anyone today would be willing to defend the teachings of Locke and Montesquieu in their entirety, and hardly anyone remains emotionally unaffected by all the charms called upon by the critics of liberalism, whether they be tradition, compassion, roots, nature, religion, culture, or community. The good conscience of liberalism has been tainted, and most Westerners are only half-believers at best, if they are not utterly thoughtless or hypocrites. There now seems to be an ineradicable question mark after liberal justice, which is said to be just another form of exploitation. A debilitating relativism has grown out of liberalism's healthy skepticism.

But none of this was true of Aron. He had studied liberalism's critics better than most anyone. But finally they left him untouched. I do not assert that he had successfully refuted them, but his temperament made him immune to their appeal. He knew Sartre and Kojève and read Heidegger carefully. He spoke of them intelligently but could not be enthused by them as were so many others. He was an anachronism in the same sense Churchill was said to be an anachronism in England. They were healthy plants of an older world mysteriously flourishing in thinner soil and necessary for the protection of its offspring.

I have often suspected that liberals ultimately have to believe in progress, or something akin to it, even though intellectual modesty now forbids them to avow it. Their respect for man's freedom, and their willingness to risk so

much in counting on its effectiveness, bespeaks a conviction that decency is not unsupported in this world. John Stuart Mill's certainty that the age of barbarism is past was only a particularly naive expression of this faith. Something in Aron—and not only his good taste— forbade him the indulgence in the easy talk about nothingness so common in his time and in his milieu. For him the fundamental experience was not unsupportedness of the good. For this reason Hitler remained the obsessive puzzle of his life. How was it possible? He expressed his wonder about this to me again in our very last meeting. How could a murderous gangster who appealed to the darkest of pasts and looked forward to the cruelest of futures be the chosen leader of one of the best educated peoples the world has known? It was his great perplexity, but it never persuaded him that good is no more grounded than evil. Somehow this *fatum* in his nature sustained his sweet disposition throughout a life in which he was in daily battle with the greatest ugliness and in which all faiths were tried to the breaking point. He worked perpetually with a truly remarkable focus of energy, and his personality was a seamless unity. He must be judged not by any single part of his product but by his whole life—his scholarship, his teaching, his journalism, and his presence itself. One sees in it none of the spectacular metamorphoses so characteristic of intellectuals. He was what he was and, as such, achieved what others talked about all the time, authenticity. He was the living example of the possibility of the democratic personality. Finally all those who cared about freedom were forced to drink at this trough. He was the man who had lived liberal democracy in its best and most comprehensive sense, and to refer to him is to touch ground.

I said that I could not claim to be his student. But he was, in fact, my teacher. Not the least of what he taught me was to appreciate a man like him.

1. The first of his dicta with which I became acquainted, one he uttered in 1949, is a fair sample of the kind of guidance he gave us all: “War improbable; peace impossible.” This remains the best formulation of our situation. Go back to the text.
 2. In America, Raymond Aron was frequently called the French Walter Lippman. Although the comparison is in fact ludicrous, it was meant to convey reverence for a unique kind of man necessary to democracy but almost impossible in it: one who both educates public opinion and is truly wise and learned. This was the ideal Aron approached. The difference between the two men is most instructive. Lippman was almost always wrong on the greatest issues (i.e., Hitler and Stalin). His instinct was unsure. He was a snob. His judgments of men were too often off the mark. (He despised Truman.) He was ashamed of being Jewish. And his learning was superficial and not motivated by a real love of knowledge; it was for the sake of his journalism. He always thought power more important than knowledge. Aron had the contrary qualities. While Lippman merely acted out an edifying role, Aron was the real thing. He was a trustworthy companion in judging the events of the modern world. Go back to the text.
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