

FRENCH LIBERALISM FROM
MONTESQUIEU TO THE
PRESENT DAY

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*Raymond Aron and the tradition of political
moderation in France*

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By a misfortune attached to the human condition, great men who are moderate are rare.¹

THE 'ENGLISH SCHOOL' OF POLITICAL MODERATION IN
FRANCE

The existence of an original tradition of political moderation in a nation with a strong legacy of radicalism might come as a surprise to those who are inclined to think of France only as a country where people have always proved to be capable of starting revolutions without often being able to complete real reforms.² At first sight, few would be inclined to associate political moderation with French thought and, in particular, the French Revolution. The common image is that in the wake of Rousseau, many French thinkers shunned moderation and opted instead for various forms of radicalism that displayed a strong propensity to excess and hyperbole in addressing political matters. They manifested a strong tendency to extremism and an inclination to unconditionally oppose existing regimes often ignoring the facts themselves.³ Almost alone among European nations, France has been, in Raymond Aron's words, a country where one of its most influential groups, the intellectuals, 'admire only destruction without conceiving of an order susceptible of replacing the one that they want to destroy'.⁴ As a result, protest in the streets has been viewed by many as preferable to rational debate and compromise, and most political crises have not been solved by negotiation, but only *in extremis* at the highest possible level.⁵

¹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 595.

² See Raymond Aron, *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 731.

³ Raymond Aron, *Espoir et peur du siècle* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1957), p. 143.

⁴ Aron, *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, p. 707. ⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 652, 719.

And yet, a closer look at the history of modern French political thought shows that the latter can offer a particularly fruitful and privileged vantage point for scholars interested in studying political moderation. The events of 1789–94 not only served as the prototype for subsequent social and political revolutions around the world, including the Russian Revolution of 1917, but also gave the Terror a new meaning and cast a long shadow on the possibility of building democratic government based on popular sovereignty. While subsequent events demonstrated that the task of reconciling liberty and equality on the ruins of the Terror was a daunting political and institutional challenge for many generations, they also led to the emergence of a distinctively French tradition of political moderation which had its high moments.

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century French thinkers who belonged to this tradition, from Benjamin Constant, Mme de Staël, François Guizot and Alexis de Tocqueville to Élie Halévy, Bertrand de Jouvenel and Raymond Aron, owed a great intellectual debt to Montesquieu. Political moderation represented the keystone of Montesquieu's political philosophy and occupied a seminal place in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), in which Montesquieu memorably described the institutional and constitutional architecture of moderate political regimes. Central to Montesquieu's conceptual apparatus was the fundamental distinction between moderate and immoderate governments underpinning his constitutional theory, based on the doctrine of the 'distribution' of powers (different from the strict separation of powers).

The connection between moderation, limited power (constitutionalism) and pluralism subsequently became a *locus classicus* in the writings of all French liberals who followed in Montesquieu's wake. Belonging to a besieged centre exposed to the crossfire of radicals from both sides of the political spectrum, they shared a strong commitment to political liberty, moderation and constitutionalism, a particular understanding of the autonomy of the political sphere and a genuine admiration for the principles undergirding the English unwritten constitution and the English parliamentary system. To paraphrase a claim once made by Allan Bloom about Raymond Aron,⁶ French liberals were all 'political' because they were genuinely interested in understanding and exercising influence upon the concrete decisions and choices made by political leaders. They believed

⁶ Allan Bloom, 'Raymond Aron: The Last of the Liberals', in Bloom, *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays 1960–1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 259. I have analysed the French tradition of political moderation in Aurelian Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748–1830* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

that the equipoise of moderate governments results from the properly institutionalized interaction between various political groups and social interests in society which mean that the dissonances and divisions of the system contribute to its strength and increase its internal capacity of self-correction.

Referring to this tradition of political moderation, Aron described himself as 'a latter-day descendant of this school,'⁷ which he sometimes called the 'English School' of political thought in France.⁸ As Aron himself pointed out, this tradition, originating with Montesquieu, stands in sharp contrast to two other schools of thought, those of Comte and Marx, which affirmed the primacy of the social and the economic sphere over the political and emphasized social unity and solidarity rather than pluralism and diversity. Unlike Marx and his disciples, Montesquieu's heirs regarded modern society primarily as a 'democratic' society to be studied and observed in an impartial manner, without excessive indignation caused by its inevitable shortcomings. Refusing to be uncritical admirers of modern society or implacable critics of its inequalities, they carved out a middle path between unbounded optimism in a radiant future, made possible by the advance of science and technology, and dark pessimism in the possibility of human emancipation. As cautious and sceptical spirits, these French liberals refused to endorse a deterministic interpretation of history. Their probabilistic and open-ended philosophy

⁷ Raymond Aron, *Main Currents of Sociological Thought*, 2 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), vol. 1, p. 259. 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. For an excellent intellectual portrait of Aron, see Pierre Manent's essay 'Raymond Aron – Political Educator', in Raymond Aron, *In Defense of Political Reason*, ed. Daniel J. Mahoney (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), pp. 1–23. I have commented on Aron's moderate political agenda in my essays 'Faces of Moderation: Raymond Aron as Committed Observer', in Daniel J. Mahoney and Brian Paul Frost (eds.), *Political Reason in an Age of Ideology* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), pp. 261–84, and 'Raymond Aron's Response to Irresponsible Metaphysics', *Nação E Defesa*, 111 (2005): 27–58, on which this chapter draws. Not surprisingly, in a chapter on the Revolution of 1848 included in *Main Currents*, Raymond Aron described himself as a political sociologist who followed in the footsteps of Montesquieu and Tocqueville. Aron's *La révolution introuvable* was reprinted in *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*; all translations from this book are mine. The English translation of *The Elusive Revolution: Anatomy of a Student Revolt* by Gordon Clough (New York: Praeger, 1969) is occasionally inaccurate.

⁸ Raymond Aron, 'Élie Halévy et l'ère des tyrannies', *Commentaire* 8 (1985), 327–50.

⁹ Democracy seen primarily as a form of *society* rather than a form of *government*. On this seminal distinction, see Aron's essay 'Tocqueville and Marx', in *History, Truth, Liberty: Selected Writings of Raymond Aron*, ed. Franciszek Draus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 165–7. On the ambiguity of the term democracy in Tocqueville's works, see Aron's essay 'Idées politiques et vision historique de Tocqueville', reprinted in Raymond Aron, *Les sociétés modernes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006), pp. 223–38.

of history reflected their trust in human freedom and their respect for human dignity by refusing to consider individuals as puppets controlled by the invisible hand of history, society and economy.

A TWENTIETH-CENTURY TOCQUEVILLIAN SPIRIT

Surprisingly, there is no mention of Tocqueville (and in particular of his critique of intellectuals in politics) in Aron's *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955), in spite of the similarity between their outlooks and despite the fact that Aron had already reflected on many Tocquevillian themes prior to 1955. Aron's *The Man Against the Tyrants* (originally published in 1946)¹⁰ contained several essays on key figures of the French political tradition such as Montesquieu, Rousseau and Constant, yet Tocqueville was conspicuously absent from its pages. Aron's belated encounter with the author of *Democracy in America* was an intellectual *coup de foudre*,¹¹ similar in many respects to his reading of Max Weber, who exercised a decisive influence on Aron's early works (such as *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*). The words that Tocqueville used to describe his solitary position – 'the liberal but not revolutionary party, which alone suits me, does not exist', he once wrote to Royer-Collard¹² – can also be applied to Aron himself who was, and remained to the very end, a lonely friend of constitutional liberty and parliamentary government in a country seduced by political radicalism and bold political narratives.

As Stanley Hoffmann pointed out, the affinity between Aron and Tocqueville was simultaneously intellectual, methodological and political, and their outlooks were convergent on several important levels.¹³ An attentive reader of Tocqueville, Aron understood the importance of formal liberties and described modern industrial societies, in spite of their many imperfections and for all of their variety, as *democratic* societies at the heart of which lies the concept of equality of conditions.¹⁴ Aron admired Tocqueville for having emphasized 'the irresistible advance of modern societies towards democracy',¹⁵ in spite of their obvious shortcomings.

¹⁰ It was reprinted in *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, pp. 107–384.

¹¹ On this issue, see Serge Audier, *Tocqueville retrouvé: genèse et enjeux du renouveau tocquevillien français* (Paris: Vrin/EHESS, 2004), pp. 77–121.

¹² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 156.

¹³ Stanley Hoffmann, 'Raymond Aron and Alexis de Tocqueville', in Mahoney and Frost, *Political Reason in an Age of Ideology*, pp. 105–23.

¹⁴ See, for example, Aron, *Essai sur les libertés* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1965), p. 72.

¹⁵ Aron, *Main Currents*, vol. 1, p. 237.

In the footsteps of his predecessors, he argued that the functioning of modern democratic society depends on the existence of a vibrant social, political and economic pluralism. He also emphasized the importance of the *political* sphere in modern democracies, refusing to subordinate the political to the economic realm.¹⁶ The condition of social classes, Aron believed, cannot be studied independently of the nature of the political regime in which they exist.¹⁷ While making a seminal distinction between social and political order, both Tocqueville and Aron underscored the complex and unique nature of the political as a distinctive dimension of human life that cannot be reduced to a mere epiphenomenon of economics or administration, as Marx and Comte argued. Neither Tocqueville nor Aron accepted at face value the claims made by Marx's and Comte's disciples who pretended to eliminate from politics allegedly vague and ill-defined notions and attempted to discover apodictic laws by using methods similar to those to be found in natural sciences. When it comes to their methods, the affinities between Aron and Tocqueville are even more striking. They brought together different intellectual traditions by combining insights from history, sociology and philosophy. Both were historical 'probabilists' who shied away from endorsing a purely deterministic view of history. Instead, they emphasized the important role played by a wide array of fortuitous circumstances and non-economic factors in determining the nature of political regimes. Furthermore, what Tocqueville and Aron had to say about liberty, authority and power derived from a preliminary understanding of the types of society to which these concepts were related. They started from admitting the existence of different types of society – aristocratic–democratic in Tocqueville's case, industrial–preindustrial in Aron's writings – and then examined the ways in which political concepts reflect and spring out of various social structures corresponding to these societies. Hence, both of them argued that it is impossible to deduce a science of government from a narrow set of principles governing human nature, entirely detached from a preliminary knowledge of history and society. Instead, a proper study of politics must rely on the insights and lessons provided by various philosophies of history that account for the development of political institutions over time and highlight their complex relations with a wide range of cultural, economic and social factors.

¹⁶ For an extensive discussion of the concept of political and the political regime, see the first chapter of *Démocratie et totalitarisme* (reprinted in *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, pp. 1229–38).

¹⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 1235.

A good example of Aron's sociological conception of liberty is his dialogue with Hayek, the author of *The Constitution of Liberty*, with whom he shared many principles and ideas. Yet they differed in one important respect. Aron believed that the nature of the checks on government and their effectiveness cannot be decided once and for all in light of an allegedly immutable theory such as the rule of law, as Hayek claimed. Aron took the latter to task for espousing an ideological style of politics that partly ignored the bewildering variety of social and political life. One of the best expressions of Aron's middle-of-the-road position on this issue can be found in the conclusion to *Essai sur les libertés*,¹⁸ where he acknowledged the limitations of those approaches relying upon a single definition of liberty, either as freedom from constraint (negative liberty) or as freedom to participate in government (positive liberty). Aron argued instead in favour of a combination of negative and positive liberty, thus continuing a line of thought that originated in the writings of Mme de Staël and Benjamin Constant. Liberty, Aron claimed, 'is not adequately defined by sole reference to the rule of law'.¹⁹ A society can be interpreted as more or less free according to *several* criteria: the degree to which power lies in the hands of the people or their representatives; the degree to which the authority of the rulers is limited in practice; and the extent to which ordinary citizens are (or are not) dependent upon the will of their leaders. None of these criteria in itself is decisive for defining freedom or discrimination, Aron insisted, but taken together they suggest the ideal of a free and open society which leaves to individuals a margin of operation as large as possible and protects their rights from undue interference and discrimination.²⁰

If Aron and Tocqueville were liberals in the European rather than the American sense of the word, their liberalism was fundamentally a doctrine of political moderation which had a distinctively eclectic ring that accounts for its richness and enduring relevance. We might characterize it as an original mixture of perfectionist and agonistic liberalism grounded in a liberalism of fear *sui generis*. The perfectionist strand is demonstrated by their belief that social and political institutions can and should create the conditions for the harmonious moral and intellectual development of individuals in accord with the progress of civilization. The agonistic strand stems from their belief that, since political institutions are the result

¹⁸ See Aron, *Essai sur les libertés*, pp. 228–30.

¹⁹ Aron, 'On Hayek and Liberalism', in *In Defense of Political Reason*, p. 85.

²⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 82, and Aron, *Essai sur les libertés*, p. 230. For Aron's critique of presenting the rule of law or political participation as the single criterion of liberty, see *ibid.*, pp. 127–33.

of both historical contingency and conscious design, rights and liberties can never be fixed, being the outcome of political conflict and various political settlements. Yet, theirs was also a liberalism of fear, seeking to avoid the evils of the past and keeping the memory of past tragedies alive as a source of instruction and a justification of the need for moderation. Nonetheless, there was much more to their commitment to liberalism than the fear of revolutionary turmoil. Their own version of perfectionist liberalism rested upon the assumption that cultivating a society of responsible agents is dependent upon giving individuals the opportunity to develop proper capacities for moral and personal autonomy. At the same time, they maintained that this ought to be done in a constitutional framework whose main purpose is to prevent the abolition of legality and to create and sustain a vibrant social and political pluralism.

DIFFERENT REVOLUTIONS, SIMILAR SCENARIOS

A cursory comparison between Tocqueville's and Aron's position towards the Revolutions of 1848 and 1968 allows us to explore in further detail the affinities between the two thinkers and examine how two moderate minds reacted to two different revolutionary moments. During the turbulent days of February and June 1848, Tocqueville was a political actor who witnessed first-hand the often chaotic attempts at building a republican regime in France. In May–June 1968, Raymond Aron became a political actor almost against his will. He wrote a number of important articles in *Le Figaro* in May–June 1968 and devoted an entire book to this issue, *La révolution introuvable*.²¹ Both authors left vivid accounts of the two revolutions and their reflections on the behaviour of political actors display their moderation, illustrated by their concern for legality and the due protection of parliamentary forms.

Hoffmann remarked that *La révolution introuvable* recalls a little, through its tone, Tocqueville's *Recollections*.²² In fact, Aron explicitly compared his scepticism towards the Revolution of 1968 with Tocqueville's and Marx's mordant critique of the Revolution of 1848 in France. The crisis of May 1968, Aron noted, unfolded in a way similar to the Revolution

²¹ These articles were reprinted in Aron, *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, pp. 723–48.

²² Hoffmann, 'Aron et Tocqueville', p. 205; an English translation of this text can be found in *Political Reason in an Age of Ideology*, pp. 105–24. Also see Audier, *Tocqueville retrouvé*, pp. 109–17. I commented on Aron's attitude towards the revolutionaries of 1968 in my essay 'Thinking Politically: Raymond Aron and the Revolution of 1968 in France', in Vladimir Tismaneanu (ed.), *Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion, and Utopia* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2010), pp. 101–29.

of 1848. He claimed the right to be as severe in his criticism of the events of May '68 as the socialist Proudhon, the communist Marx, and the liberal Tocqueville were in their critiques of the actors of 1848. It is important to point out that Tocqueville and Aron refused to give a uni-dimensional explanation of the crises of 1848 and 1968 and resisted the temptation to settle scores with their critics when laying down their accounts of the events. 'What is surprising', Fernand Braudel remarked about Tocqueville's *Recollections*, 'is that despite the ferocity of his words, the prevailing impression is one of serene judgment without personal bias. This may be because, for Tocqueville, all these actors do not determine events as much as they are determined by them – victims rather than responsible for their roles.'²³ Much the same can be said of Aron's account of *les événements* of May 1968, which stood out as an example of lucid political judgement at a critical point in time when many French intellectuals shunned political moderation.

In 1968 Aron rediscovered what Tocqueville himself knew so well: the fragility of liberty. Among all developed countries, Aron remarked, France went the farthest in discovering the vulnerability of its own liberal political order during the events of May–June 1968. For him, what occurred in 1968 was simultaneously far more and far less than a revolution. Aron spoke instead of a political crisis that combined the features of a genuine popular revolt and a psychodrama. In Aron's opinion, the events of May–June 1968 proved once again that the French nation had not yet been cured of the 'revolutionary virus'²⁴ that had been at the heart of modern French history for the last two centuries and a half. A nation that tends to create intellectuals rather than citizens, France has traditionally been the country where demonstrators in the streets have made and unmade governments as they saw fit and where intellectuals have often had a dismissive and derogatory attitude towards political institutions.²⁵

What is remarkable about the events of May '68 is that, as in 1848, many people believed that a monumental social and political revolution might be underway, but subsequent events proved them wrong.²⁶ New *comités d'action* were formed that sought to disengage themselves from conventional politics and proposed a new political style by combining

²³ Fernand Braudel, 'Introduction to the Transaction Edition', in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections: The French Revolution of 1848*, ed. J. P. Mayer and A. P. Kerr (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1987), p. xv.

²⁴ Aron, *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, p. 629. ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 696.

²⁶ Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), p. 4.

discipline and improvisation, centralism and self-government in an original way.²⁷ And yet, Aron pointed out, all this turned out to have had surprisingly little enduring *institutional* influence over time and a great deal of the original enthusiasm dissipated quite soon, as was the case in 1848 (of course, for different reasons).

Aron had no patience for the intellectuals' nostalgia for direct political action and their romanticization of action committees. He pointed out that, although the word revolution was on almost everyone's lips in May 1968, in the end it turned out not to be a 'real' revolution according to the conventional meaning of the term, for it did not lead to a change of regime. Furthermore Aron disliked the favourite slogans of the students – 'Demand the impossible', 'It is forbidden to forbid' and 'Take your desires for realities'. While they appealed to those with libertarian leanings and surrealist sensibilities, Aron pointed out that it was hard to imagine how a new social and political order might have been built solely on the rhetoric of self-realization, and how the spirit of revolt undergirding the participatory practices proposed by the *comités d'action* could be reconciled with the conventional principles of democratic legitimacy.

But the real significance of the events of May 1968 came from elsewhere, and it is in this regard that Aron's diagnosis overlaps with that of Tocqueville on the Revolution of 1848. To fully understand the significance of the events of 1848 and 1968, a larger perspective was needed that took into account the main trends at work in modern society. The popular revolts of 1848 revealed the incipient tensions of industrial society, while the student revolts that occurred throughout the whole world in the 1960s, from Japan to France, and from Berkeley to Dakar, revealed the challenging of old authorities such as the Catholic church, the universities and the military that was taking place at that time. In France, these events revealed a genuine political crisis, which the country was not fully prepared to tackle yet. Tocqueville had made a similar point in his *Recollections*, in which he remarked that the events of February 1848 caught Louis-Philippe and his government by surprise after years of vigorous opposition to the official policies of the July Monarchy that revealed the deep crisis of the country. Both the king and his ministers, Tocqueville argued, behaved 'like a man awakened at night by an earthquake, who, seeing his house falling down in the darkness and even the

²⁷ See Kristin Ross, *May 68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 90–9. For a critique of Ross from the left, see Daniel Bensaid, 'Red and Black', *Radical Philosophy* 119 (May–June 2003), 1–4.

ground giving way under his feet, remains distracted and lost amid the universal unforeseen ruin'.²⁸ This was all the more surprising given the complex nature and causes of the events of 1848, which were at the same time anachronistic and futurist.

Curiously, Aron also pointed to this tension at the heart of *les événements* of May–June 1968: they were 'anachronistic in the dream of the Commune, or of the students' power, futurist in spite of a utopian language to the extent that it stands up against the sclerosis of organizational structures'.²⁹ The actors involved in the events of May 1968, Aron claimed, saw the world through the lenses of a largely imagined communist society that was quite different from the communism practised by the former Warsaw Pact or China. They wrongly believed that they could go beyond Marxism. In reality, they relied on little else than a mixture of ideas deriving from pre-Marxist utopian socialism with strong libertarian proclivities. In so doing, they forgot the lessons of history and ignored the objective constraints of economy and society in general.

Aron's concern for the return to legality and his sceptical attitude towards the legitimacy and originality of the revolutionary claims in 1968 remind us of Tocqueville's reaction to the unguarded enthusiasm of his friend, Gustave de Beaumont, upon learning about the fall of the July Monarchy in February 1848. On that occasion, Tocqueville criticized Beaumont for his zeal in celebrating the fall of the government and not realizing that it was authority itself that was lying on the ground. Beaumont, Tocqueville remembered, thought that it was possible to enjoy their victory first, and worry about the consequences later. Tocqueville disagreed. Although he felt no particular liking for the corrupt regime of Louis-Philippe, he feared that its abrupt fall would subvert the legality of the representative institutions. 'I thought', Tocqueville acknowledged, 'the political machine had been given too violent a jolt for power to remain in the hands of the intermediary party to which I belonged, and I foresaw that it would slip into hands almost as hostile to me as those who had lost it'.³⁰

There are numerous pages in Tocqueville's *Recollections* in which he emphasized the importance of preserving even the slightest traces of legal forms in times of turmoil and confusion. Referring to his attitude during the turbulent days that followed the fall of Louis-Philippe's government,

²⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections*, trans. Teixeira de Mattos (New York: Meridian, 1959), p. 64.

²⁹ Aron, *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, p. 672.

³⁰ Tocqueville, *Recollections*, p. 34.

Tocqueville pointed out that he was particularly concerned about the fate of the Chamber, which was becoming more and more irrelevant as time passed by. Surprised by Tocqueville's concern, Beaumont asked: 'Who is thinking about the Chamber? Whom could it help or harm in the present state of affairs?' To this, Tocqueville remarked:

I felt that he was wrong to speak like that, and indeed he was. It is true that at that moment the Chamber had been reduced to singular impotence, since the majority was despised and the minority outstripped by public opinion. But M. de Beaumont forgot that it is especially in times of revolution that everything that keeps the concept of law before the people, everything, that is, from its least important instruments to its most important external symbols, takes on a special value. For it is particularly at a time of anarchy and universal collapse that one feels the need to cling to the smallest simulacrum of tradition or broken fragment of authority, in order to preserve what remains of a half-destroyed constitution or to clear it away completely.³¹

These words nicely illustrate Tocqueville's political moderation and his centrist political agenda.

Tocqueville also discounted the revolutionary leaders' claim to originality. Those who claim to be the originators and leaders of revolutions, he argued, rarely originate or lead anything, and their sole merit is to have the courage to go straight ahead while the wind blows.³² Compared with the real Revolution of 1789, the events of February and June 1848 were nothing but a second-rate play. In this case, Tocqueville claimed, the imitation was obvious: 'The men of the first revolution were still alive in everybody's mind, their deeds and their words fresh in the memory. And everything I saw that day was plainly stamped with the imprint of such memories; the whole time I had the feeling that we had staged a play about the French Revolution, rather than that we were continuing it'.³³ Tocqueville could never take the actors of 1848 seriously and remarked that the events of June 1848 seemed a mediocre tragedy played by a provincial troupe devoid of greatness.³⁴ His critique of mob rule suggested that the deeper (and enduring) cause of the French malaise did not lie with the corrupt government of Louis-Philippe, but was related to the weakness of intermediary bodies in French society and the strength of the centralized administration.

A century later, confronted by a new revolutionary wave, Aron reached a similar conclusion, pointing to the weakness of civil society and the fragility of representative institutions, which did not offer reliable means

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46–7. ³² *Ibid.*, p. 35. ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 53. ³⁴ *Ibid.*

for solving political crises swiftly. He criticized de Gaulle's presidential regime for having suppressed or weakened the representative institutions of parliamentary democracy that could have served, during periods of crisis, as a salutary buffer between those in power and the people at large.³⁵

THE PRIORITY OF THE POLITICAL

We can examine further the similarities and differences between Aron's and Tocqueville's moderation by taking into account their views on the relationship between the political and the social and their common critique of the literary spirit in politics. Aron went further than Tocqueville in highlighting the importance of the nature of political regimes and emphasizing what he called (in the opening chapter of *Democracy and Totalitarianism*) 'la primauté de la politique'³⁶ vis-à-vis the economic sphere. Furthermore, both Aron and Tocqueville were fascinated by the ways in which intellectuals in general, and their fellow French intellectuals in particular, tended to interpret social and political reality. Aron came to believe that it is characteristic of intellectuals in general not to seek to understand their 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. The similarity between Aron and Tocqueville is remarkable in this respect. In *Recollections*, the latter took intellectuals to task for seeing in politics 'what is ingenuous and new instead of what is true' and for their inclination to appreciate 'good acting and fine speaking without reference to the play's results, and finally, judging by impressions rather than reasons'. Tocqueville added that this propensity was not confined to French writers, but could be found among the general public as well: 'To tell the truth, the whole nation shares it a little, and the French public as a whole often takes a literary man's view of politics.'³⁷

Aron agreed with this assessment. Addressing the defining myths of the left in *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, he criticized the tendency of the latter 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

³⁵ Jean-Pierre Vernant cited in Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, p. 59.

³⁶ Aron, *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, p. 1235.

³⁷ Tocqueville, *Recollections*, p. 67.

efficiency and productivity, and pretended to offer solutions to the alienation of the working classes.³⁸ Contemporary Western societies, Aron wrote in an essay devoted to Tocqueville and Marx, 'have a triple ideal, bourgeois citizenship, technological efficiency and the right of every individual to choose the path of his salvation'.³⁹ From this, he drew two important conclusions. First, he emphasized that all of these ideals must be simultaneously taken into consideration when making political decisions about allocating scarce resources; and, second, he warned his colleagues not to be 'so naive as to believe that it is easy to achieve all three'.⁴⁰ As Aron himself acknowledged, the limitations of industrial civilization, the power of money and the price of economic success tend to offend the susceptibilities of intellectuals, who become over-emotional in preaching a strange form of intellectual and political evangelism, while claiming at the same time to be more competent than ordinary citizens in judging the flaws of society.⁴¹ 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, many intellectuals often refuse to think *politically* and 'prefer ideology that is a rather literary image of a desirable society, rather than studying the functioning of a given economy, of a parliamentary system, and so forth'.⁴² 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. This conclusion was a restatement of Tocqueville's diagnosis from Book 3 of *The Old Regime and the Revolution*.

THE PREREQUISITES OF POLITICAL JUDGEMENT

Three key principles defined Aron's political moderation. First, he rejected any dogmatic interpretation of politics and society. As Aron

³⁸ In this regard, Aron's argument bears some affinities with Schumpeter's, Hayek's and Nozick's explanations for the intellectuals' general hostility to capitalism.

³⁹ Aron, 'Tocqueville and Marx', p. 195.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ On this topic, see Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2001), pp. 213-35.

⁴² Raymond Aron, *Thinking Politically: A Liberal in the Age of Ideology* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997), p. 154.

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 compromise between them and ought to be aware that this solution is only a temporary one.⁴³ A revealing example is Aron's take on formal freedoms in liberal societies. On the one hand, he insisted that these freedoms, albeit imperfect, are nonetheless essential to the functioning of Western democracies. On the other hand, Aron pointed out that it would be an error to measure individual freedom only by the extent to which citizens enjoy or not these formal freedoms. Sometimes, he noted, 'it is society that seems tyrannical rather than the state ... sometimes it is the state that, by refusing wage increases or being thought to be under the influence of plutocratic minorities or a conspiracy of the military or the industrialists, seeks to escape the will of those who, according to the law of democracy, should provide its inspiration if not its management'.⁴⁴

The second key principle of Aron's probabilistic science of politics is the rejection of any global determinism of history, such as Marxist historical materialism, that deprives the political sphere of its own autonomy. Believing that social and political reality is neither incoherent nor totally intelligible, Aron insisted time and again that the horizon of history always remains open and that there is always a margin of manoeuvre, even in the darkest of times. He denounced the false historical consciousness that refuses to take into account the plurality of meanings of human actions and which confuses, in his own words, 'an ideal or an episode with an objective that is at once imminent and sacred'.⁴⁵ 'When I say I don't believe in the sense of history', Aron confessed, 'I am not saying that human history does not move in a certain direction, and above all I am not saying that reflective man cannot provide himself with certain goals. I was a disciple of Kant 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'.⁴⁶

⁴³ See, for example, Aron, 'Fanaticism, Prudence, and Faith', in *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, p. 346.

⁴⁴ Aron, 'Tocqueville and Marx', p. 191.

⁴⁵ Aron, 'On False Historical Consciousness', in *History, Truth, Liberty*, p. 115.

⁴⁶ Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 263.

The third key principle of Aron's political philosophy concerns the conditions of political action in an environment that is in constant flux and is characterized by risk and chronic uncertainty. Referring to 'the essential historicity of political choices', Aron explained that, in the end, all political choices still remain 'inseparable from particular circumstances, sometimes rational but never finally proved and never of the same nature as scientific truths or moral imperatives'.⁴⁷ Historicity, he explained in an important essay on 'Max Weber and Modern Social Science', is intrinsically linked to uncertainty and risk: 'Historical existence is made up of uncertain struggles in which no cause is pure, no decision without risk, no action without unforeseeable consequences'.⁴⁸

What all these principles (defining Aron's moderation) have in common is an emphasis on the complex nature of the political sphere and an affirmation of human liberty and the indeterminacy of politics and history. 'A false philosophy of history', Aron warned – that is, one that posits an inevitable end – 'breeds only fanaticism'.⁴⁹ The future of political and economic regimes, he wrote in 1958, depends on too many factors in order for us to predict with absolute certainty which regime will triumph in the end.⁵⁰ At the same time, Aron made clear that, for all the uncertainty and risks that define the political realm, there always remains some room for making reasonable decisions in politics: 'We are surrounded by constraints. There is nevertheless a margin of liberty, an awareness of oneself that gives meaning to our decision to do this or that'.⁵¹

As for political analysts, in order to understand the forces at work in political and social life and in order to be able make informed judgments, they must pay attention not only to structural factors which limit human freedom, but also to contingency and the plasticity of human nature. Here is a revealing passage that sheds light on Aron's understanding of the prerequisites of political judgement:

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

⁴⁷ Aron, 'On False Historical Consciousness', p. 117.

⁴⁸ Aron, 'Max Weber and Modern Social Science', in *History, Truth, Liberty*, p. 370.

⁴⁹ Aron, 'On False Historical Consciousness', p. 117.

⁵⁰ Aron, *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, p. 1462.

⁵¹ Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 264.

sometimes appropriate but sometimes apparently irrational with respect to the actor's objective.⁵²

In other words, one must take into account the plurality of goals and perspectives of all 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 at any point in time.

Aron followed all of these principles in his writings and believed that anyone writing on political topics must always ask the fundamental question: 'What would I do if I were in the place of the statesman?' His political moderation was reflected not only by the ideas he defended, but also by the manner in which he defended the principles of liberal and open society. Rather than acting like an ideologue of capitalism ready to defend the latter at all costs and unwilling to acknowledge that its enemies might also be in the right on some issues, Aron offered a complex and nuanced sociological analysis of capitalism that sought to determine and evaluate critically the economic and social conditions that permit freedom and pluralism to survive in modern society, along with the increasing demands for organization. Partly under the inspiration of Élie Halévy, partly due to his sustained intellectual dialogue with Marx, Aron spent a great deal of time and energy studying diverse aspects of modern society, from economics, social relationships and class relations to political systems and relations between nations. In the 1950s and 1960s, he rejected the once famous – and now largely forgotten – theory of the convergence of capitalism and communism and believed that capitalist liberal societies could be peacefully and effectively reformed, in spite of their inherent shortcomings.

While being fully committed to such principles as freedom, pluralism and the rule of law, Aron insisted that the endorsement of the principles underpinning Western liberal democratic societies was not supposed to be a synonym for a complacent form of (Cold War) conservatism, which explains why he cannot be considered to be one of capitalism's official thinkers. Aron did not follow the route of Hayek and Friedman, who believed that any step towards a welfare state was a simultaneous victory for totalitarianism. 'Having political opinions', Aron argued, 'is not a matter of having an ideology once and for all; it is a question of taking the

⁵² Aron, *Politics and History: Selected Essays by Raymond Aron*, ed. M. B. Conant (New York: The Free Press, 1978), pp. 48–9.

right decisions in changing circumstances.⁵³ Our opinions and choices, he insisted, must be based on a careful consideration of facts and should take into account the multifarious and complex ways in which changing circumstances and factual constraints affect our decisions, strategies and goals. A purely philosophical critique of capitalist society that ignores the lessons of history and the constraints of economy and politics lacks coherence and lucidity. This was one of Aron's central beliefs and it explains why he, unlike Tocqueville, devoted special attention to the concept of 'industrial society',⁵⁴ which allowed Aron to study the common traits of socialism and capitalism before explaining the fundamental ideological differences between them.

A FINAL WORD ABOUT ARON'S MODERATION

In his *Memoirs*, Aron modestly described himself as 'an analyst and a critic', and made a distinction between 'critics' and 'creators' who can exercise significant influence on their contemporaries. While many of the contributions of the critics are ephemeral pieces tied to transitory situations, the creators 'at the risk of error, construct cathedrals of concepts with the courage of imagination'.⁵⁵ With the benefit of hindsight, it is fair to say that Aron, known to be 'a model of intellectual generosity',⁵⁶ was overly modest when making this distinction and placing himself in the category of mere critics. If he was only a critic as he claimed, then he certainly was a peculiar kind of critic, hardly to be found today in academia and beyond. For one thing, Aron had the rare gift of engaging in a thoughtful and critical dialogue with thinkers with whom he strongly disagreed (Marx, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty). At the same time, he did not shy away from highlighting his differences with the authors he admired most. For example, if Aron strongly admired Tocqueville's sociological and political acumen, he also believed that Tocqueville overestimated the threat of soft (democratic) despotism and did not fully appreciate the import of science and technology, which Aron considered to be two revolutionary principles at work in modern society. In Aron's view, Tocqueville

⁵³ See Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 150; for more details on Aron's method, also see *ibid.*, pp. 201, 250, and my analysis in 'Faces of Moderation', 264–70.

⁵⁴ Two of Aron's books stand out in this regard: *Dix-huit leçons sur la société industrielle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962) and *La lutte de classes: nouvelles leçons sur les sociétés industrielles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

⁵⁵ Aron, *Memoirs: Fifty Years of Political Reflections* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1990), p. 456.

⁵⁶ This is Daniel Mahoney's phrase from his essay, 'Aron, Marx, and Marxism', in Mahoney and Frost, *Political Reason in an Age of Ideology*, p. 35.

misunderstood the essence of industrial civilization in which he saw only one of the possible types of modern commercial society.⁵⁷ It is also fair to say that Tocqueville's sometimes strong sense of nationalism was alien to Aron's more cosmopolitan outlook.

More importantly, Aron was not a disgruntled critic sitting on the margins and commenting with detachment or irony on others' initiatives and principles. He also made many sensible choices in dark times when others chose to defend inhuman regimes, closing their eyes to their obvious inequalities and injustice. 'Who propagated "deadly" teachings?' Aron asked in his *Memoirs*. 'Those who sought Mecca in turn in Moscow, Belgrade, Peking, and Havana, or those who, freed from soteriological beliefs, worked as hard as they could for prosperity and for the reform of liberal regimes, the least bad of our civilization, perhaps the least bad in history.'⁵⁸ The question seems rhetorical. Unlike Sartre, Aron cannot be criticized today for having failed to denounce the errors of communism when it was politically incorrect to do so.⁵⁹ To be sure, he was never a faithful or exalted 'churchman' (to use his own term to describe communist fellow travellers) who sought to justify Stalin and Hitler by using fallacious arguments and ignoring the reality on the ground, or by appealing to philosophical arguments about pure will, free mutual recognition or the inevitable end of history. He understood the impossibility of reconciling Marx, Hegel, Kierkegaard and Lenin, as his existentialist critics tried to do, and he never condoned authoritarian leaders as some of his colleagues on the right did with regard to Salazar, Franco or Pinochet.⁶⁰

Three decades after his death, it is evident that Aron's moderate political agenda was not 'une philosophie pour âmes tendres',⁶¹ to use Sartre's words. Aron's moderation was in fact a genuine act of courage that led him to defend unpopular causes in dark times, always insisting on the importance of what he called 'le fil de soie de la légalité'.⁶² As such, Aron's attitude confirms Burke's claim that true 'moderation (which time and situations will clearly distinguish from the counterfeits of pusillanimity and indecision) is the virtue only of superior minds. It requires a deep courage, and full of reflection, to be temperate when the voice of multitudes (the specious mimic of fame and reputation) passes

⁵⁷ Aron, *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, p. 1461.

⁵⁸ Aron, *Memoirs*, p. 479.

⁵⁹ On this issue, see Fred Baumann's essay, 'Raymond Aron and Jean-Paul Sartre', in Mahoney and Frost, *Political Reason in the Age of Ideology*, pp. 47-74.

⁶⁰ Aron, *Memoirs*, p. 457.

⁶¹ See Aron, 'De la condition historique du sociologue', reprinted in *Les sociétés modernes*, p. 1092.

⁶² Aron, *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, p. 1465.

judgment against you.⁶³ Drawing upon the uncertain lights of historical experience and having at his disposal only partial truths revealed by the latter, Aron's moderate political agenda did not constitute an ideology, and his anti-perfectionism prevented him from espousing a Manichaean view of the world (like his communist critics), or an intransigent attitude in the name of purity and truth (in the manner of Simone Weil, who recommended the interdiction of all political parties in order to restore the original 'purity' of democracy). As Aron argued, it would be unreasonable to affirm that one of the regimes (capitalism) represents the 'good' while the other one (communism) incarnates the 'evil'. In reality, both regimes are imperfect and must not be idolized. And yet, Aron added, the degree and nature of their imperfection are fundamentally *different*. Pluralist-constitutional regimes have 'des imperfections de fait'⁶⁴ (a tendency towards oligarchy and demagoguery) which can be partly remedied, while regimes which do not allow for free political competition and rotation in power have a structural deficiency (a tendency towards monopoly of power by a single party) that makes them incapable of political reform. This nuanced but forceful conclusion nicely illustrates Aron's programmatic moderation that combined the desire to comprehend with the courage to judge. In all his writings he manifested himself as an intransigent anti-communist and defender of the liberal order, while avoiding a black-and-white or deterministic approach and affirming at the same time that the political horizon always remains open, and that there is no other means of salvation for a country in turmoil than moderation.⁶⁵

Why did Aron's sensible words fail to capture the imagination of many of his colleagues and students? It is worth remembering that only a few decades ago, it was fashionable in Paris to argue that it was better to be wrong with Sartre than right with Aron. The latter's moderation marginalized him in the middle and his balanced and detached position irritated sensibilities on both ends of the political spectrum. Aron was never attracted to bold philosophical or theological interpretations of history. 'Since I am not a believer of any church', he confessed in his memoirs, 'I leave the space of transcendental faith empty, and I personally adhere to

⁶³ Edmund Burke, *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1992), p. 16.

⁶⁴ Aron, *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, p. 1446.

⁶⁵ A memorable conclusion from *Démocratie et totalitarisme* is worth quoting here: 'Il est possible de ne pas mettre tous les régimes sur le même plan au point de vue des valeurs, sans que cette discrimination permette de dicter, au nom de la science ou de la philosophie, ce qu'il faut faire à un moment donné' (*Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, p. 1454).

the faith of the philosopher, doubt rather than negation.⁶⁶ It is this sound dose of scepticism and self-restraint that explains why, in politics, moderates like Aron are often portrayed as indecisive and ambivalent, and why their initiatives and ideas are usually dismissed as mere expressions of political opportunism, weariness or conservatism.

Yet a closer and unbiased look at the virtues of political moderation as illustrated by the French School from Montesquieu to Aron demonstrates that moderates do *not* lack political vision, courage and practical wisdom, even when their vision appears to be less inspiring and appealing than millenarian and radical movements searching for ultimate certainties and solutions on earth. Moderation is sometimes the only position that allows one to defend reasonable policies and courses of action which are often neglected by overzealous radicals and ultra-conservatives alike.

Aron saw himself as an intellectual of a rather peculiar breed. 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'.⁶⁷ His moderation was equally original. 'My passion for analysis', Aron confessed, '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'.⁶⁸ Having lived in dark times, Aron was to the very end a solitary figure whose politics of understanding rejected any form of politics of reason or faith. His solitude was the inevitable outcome of the polarized context in which he lived and wrote, in a highly unstable political and social situation, favourable to the appearance of various forms of radicalism and extremism. If, in such an environment, no moderate voice could have triumphed in the long run, it can also be argued that many of Aron's ideas prevailed through the works and initiatives of like-minded French liberals, some of whom had been his own students or collaborators. Through them and others, Aron's voice is surprisingly alive today and continues to speak to us, reminding his readers of the fragility of liberal order and the difficult apprenticeship of liberty that each of us must make every day.

⁶⁶ Aron, *Memoirs*, p. 482.

⁶⁷ The phrase is from Aron's speech on the occasion of his election to the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in 1965, as quoted in N. Baverez, *Raymond Aron: un moraliste au temps des idéologies* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), p. 338.

⁶⁸ Aron, *Thinking Politically*, p. 301.

The politics of individual rights: Marcel Gauchet and Claude Lefort

Samuel Moyn

'How not to be astonished at the suddenly restored fortunes of this theme and slogan of the rights of man that, not long ago, one would have thought amongst the most permanently disqualified for use?' Marcel Gauchet posed the question in 1980, and it was a good one. In French political thought of the era, rights talk was in fashion. 'Only yesterday,' he continued, rights

were the yellowing paper of primary school, the worm-eaten accessory for the homilies of the very last refugee of the Third Republic, the vulgar instrument of the dominant ideology, dismantled with the smallest effort by the least beginner in the techniques of suspicion. Yet somehow the old has become new, and what was most suspect is now beyond suspicion, and now the outmoded, wordy, and hypocritical rights of man have regained grace, virginity, and a kind of vivacious audacity in the eyes of the most subtle and exigent members of the avant garde.¹

The renaissance of rights in the French political theory of the time posed a fascinating challenge for Claude Lefort, theorist of 'the political'. By 1980, Lefort's own students – Gauchet first among them – were mature enough to take Lefortian theory in unexpected ways of their own; and, indeed, human rights proved the theme on which Lefort and Gauchet tangled and the one-time disciple became a renegade.

It is often said that what was significant about the turn to rights is that it brought French theory into conformity with French practice, as a liberal polity finally gained liberal theorists. But that argument ignores the fact that the Anglo-American world had very little chronological advance over its French counterpart in discovering the philosophical validity of rights, after almost two centuries in which no theoretical movement championed them. Conversely, even the French discovery of rights is hard to see

¹ M. Gauchet, 'Les droits de l'homme ne sont pas une politique', *Le Débat* 3 (July–August 1980), 3. This essay has been reprinted in Gauchet, *La démocratie contre elle-même* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).