

## REVIEW

*Raymond Aron's  
Philosophy of Political  
Responsibility Freedom,  
Democracy and  
National Identity*

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*Raymond Aron's Philosophy of Political Responsibility Freedom, Democracy and National Identity* by Christopher Adair-Toteff. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

Like most twentieth-century French intellectuals, Aron's development was profoundly shaped by German thought. But whereas Sartre, Aron's exact contemporary, was steeped in Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger, and perhaps the most important member of the next generation, Michel Foucault, was indebted to Nietzsche, in Aron's case, Adair-Toteff argues, the most important influence was Max Weber. Though Aron was indebted to Husserl for his reflections on the philosophy of history, it was from Weber that he absorbed the emphasis on 'the need for political responsibility' (p. 37).

A sense of political responsibility for Aron, according to Adair-Toteff, meant two things. First, it demanded that politicians (but also the electorate, and the intellectuals who exercised influence in public life) carefully consider the consequences of their actions (p. 42). Politics could involve life or death decisions and had to be treated with all the seriousness that entailed. Second, it required that politicians maintain a critical distance from themselves. Vanity was a particularly dangerous failing in a politician (p. 82). But while the list of requirements for political responsibility might have been short, putting them into practice was far easier said than done. Twentieth-century politics was, for Aron, largely the history of the pursuit of the illusions that had arisen because the requirements of political responsibility had been ignored.

As Adair-Toteff shows in his opening chapter, chief amongst those illusions was the historicist conception of history itself. Aron was resolutely against deterministic theories in which history followed a necessary course. The prime example of this was Marxism. In his work on the philosophy of history in the 1930s, Aron repudiated its progressivist assumptions, arguing that the relationship between historical events had to be understood probabilistically in a way that made prediction of the kind allegedly found in the natural sciences impossible. Aron was, in this respect, broadly in the neo-Kantian tradition that distinguished the human from the natural sciences, but was less inclined to take an *a priori* approach to either the theory of historical knowledge or to the nature of the historical process. Indeed, Adair-Toteff argues that Aron increasingly leaned towards sociology, giving less time to pure philosophy in favour of a discipline more oriented towards the problems of action (p. 143).

This shift was in keeping with Aron's political realism, which rendered him immune to all forms of ideological temptation. He was repelled by Hitler, though this was less because he was Jewish than because of the blindness of the Nazi enterprise (p. 87). But he was equally disinclined to embrace any conservative nostalgia for the past (p. 152). This independent-mindedness made him an astute critic of the the new bi-polar international order that emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War. This post-war world would not survive more than a decade after Aron's death in 1983, but while it lasted, he was more attuned than most of his contemporaries to its logic. This was thanks partly, so Adair-Totefeff shows, to Aron's interest (also atypical for a French intellectual of his generation) in Clausewitz and Thucydides. On the one hand, Aron was clear-sighted about the oppressive nature of the Soviet Regime, which he regarded as built on lies (p. 154). But he was equally critical of Western intellectuals, particularly in France, who continued to support the Soviet Union long after its totalitarian character under Stalin had become clear.

Aron's critique of revolutionary and utopian thinking, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955), which argued that Marxism was to the French intellectual what Marx and Engels had proclaimed religion to be for the working class, put him at odds with almost all the leading thinkers of his generation. Sartre, for example, with whom he had once been on friendly terms, never forgave him for it. But Adair-Totefeff argues that unlike his contemporaries, Aron was willing to engage with the new political realities that came along with the nuclear age. Sovereignty, for Aron, was in the last resort the power to decide to go war, and to think that perpetual peace could be achieved by international institutions was a liberal illusion that was potentially as dangerous as the illusions of Marxism (p. 116). The nation-state, for Aron, remained the dominant political unit, and that meant admitting that some nation-states were far more powerful than others. The ultimate goal of all politics, national or international, had to be the negative one of trying to prolong the absence of war (p. 122).

This sceptical orientation stemmed from the fact that in Aron's political thought, Adair-Totefeff observes, freedom and power went together (p. 146). Like Montesquieu and de Tocqueville, he argues persuasively, Aron saw freedom as civil and moral; that is, it required government. But the classical liberal ideal of the rule of law that these thinkers had endorsed was no more than that for Aron; the realities of power were always liable to corrupt it in practice. Adair-Totefeff does remark in the conclusion that he has some serious differences of opinion with Aron, and he is clearly so well-versed in Aron's thought that the reader might wish that he had given more space to his own criticisms of it (p. 171). There are certainly some puzzles to do with both Aron's philosophy of history and his political philosophy.

For example, Aron apparently disagreed with Hannah Arendt, another prominent critic of totalitarianism with whom he shared a secular Jewish background, over the identity between Nazism and Communism. Yet he apparently endorsed Hayek's distinction between nomocratic (law-governed) and telocratic (goal-directed) regimes. If both Nazism and Communism are telocratic, it is not clear how Aron could maintain they were at bottom distinct (pp. 142, 153). Similarly, Aron wanted to argue that the aim of historical inquiry was to assign responsibility by tying events to intentions. But his view of historical processes was that while they were retrospectively intelligible, they reflected no grand design. The relationship between an understanding of events as contingent and probabilistic and as the product of intention was another feature of Aron's thought that remained unclear (pp. 25, 30).

There is thus a suspicion that Aron's turn from philosophy to sociology meant that he never quite got into precise focus the nature of the distinction between theory and practice which his own rejection of Marxism implied. This is somewhat ironic given Adair-Totefeff's portrayal of Aron as essentially Aristotelian in his political theorizing, because the distinction between participating in political action and comprehending it was fundamental to Aristotle, who can be read, just like Weber, as an advocate of political responsibility. Adair-Totefeff is not quite as original as he claims in highlighting this theme in Aron's political thought, because Tony Judt's *The Burden of Responsibility Blum Camus Aron and the French Twentieth Century* (1998), contained an important discussion of it. But Judt's book, which oddly goes unmentioned in *Raymond Aron's Philosophy*, fully supports Adair-Totefeff's argument that responsibility was

a vital concept for Aron. Adair-Totef also explores the theme in greater depth than Judt, and it is deserved praise for *Raymond Aron's Philosophy* that the reader's reaction to the unresolved issues it contains will likely be to want to read more by Aron himself.