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Raymond Aron on the Use of Force and Legitimacy

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Raymond Aron, beyond his rich theories and deep analyses, remains for me above all a professor of moral and intellectual sanity. He was a teacher of what he saw as the two supreme intellectual principles: the respect for facts and the respect for the arguments of others. From his devotion to these two principles, Aron achieved in his work a remarkable mixture of firmness and moderation, an awareness of the complexities of the world together with an understanding of the need for action and for choice.

Of course, Aron did waver on some issues. On the issue of the French nuclear deterrent and on the prospects for European integration, he changed his emphasis several times. But on most issues, he made a number of basic choices that are still relevant today. He broke with his left-wing intellectual friends over the fight against totalitarian communism. At the same time, he broke with his friends on the right over the war in Algeria and the Suez Crisis. These positions and others left Aron quite isolated in French intellectual circles, but he never faltered in his convictions.

This quality of informed yet firm moderation means that Aron remains very relevant to the disputes between Americans and Europeans today, and particularly to the issue of legitimacy for using force. We often hear that the Europeans think legitimacy comes from international law incarnated in institutions—the UN Security Council and others. Americans, at least as Robert Kagan and Frank Fukuyama have explained it, see legitimacy essentially coming from the American Constitution and from the American electorate—not from the consent of other countries or, indeed, from universal principles.

It so happens that in his magnum opus, *Peace and War Among Nations* (1962), Aron has two parallel chapters on maintaining peace in a world beyond power politics—entitled “peace by law” and “peace by empire”—that roughly correspond to the European and American views. And he criticizes both. The originality of his position is interesting for our debates today. His critique of international law is fairly conventional, but it is a convention that goes back to Hegel and many others, that international law is not really law, that there is no authority, no constraint—no “praetor,” as he says. I think he would have agreed with the recent articles by Tufts Professor Michael Glennon saying that it is about time to abandon this illusion, because rules that are honored only in the breach do not have the status of laws. So Aron had a fairly simple notion that states are in a state of nature, not in a civil state; international relations are defined by each state reserving the right to use force when negotiation fails. Hence he was not

against the notion of preemption or prevention, which could, in certain circumstances, be indispensable.

On the other hand, the second chapter was a critique of “peace by empire.” And there, despite his well-deserved reputation as an Atlanticist, he did not shrink from speaking of an American empire—not an empire in the sense of the political control of territory but in the sense of trying to perpetuate the asymmetry of promulgating laws that apply to others but that do not apply to itself. And he thought, as Montesquieu did, that an imperial republic endangers its own republican character. So he was against the Wilsonian crusade in the name of the law. His motto was “moderation and wisdom gain time,” which in the Cold War framework meant supporting George Kennan’s strategy of containment.

Aron and the Cold War

To deal with the Soviet Union, Aron had a formula which I think still is the best formula for understanding the years of the Cold War: *Paix Impossible, Guerre Improbable* (Peace Impossible, War Improbable). Peace was impossible because you could not have a real peace with an ideologically offensive totalitarian regime; war was improbable because the Soviet Union has suffered so much destruction and because nuclear weapons promised untold further destruction. In his view, a crusade against the Soviet Union, as many at the time recommended, was unrealistic and dangerous, but there was hope that the contradictions of the system would one day, if we were firm, lead to its transformation or to its collapse. Hence, containment and rearmament were the only options.

But at the same time, Aron was always careful to separate the issue of national liberation from the struggle against totalitarianism. For many people it was the same—either Nasser was Hitler or the Algerian FLN were communists—but Aron emphasized that these were different struggles. Thus, for example, he was very much in favor of UN intervention in Korea. On the other hand, he broke with his circle by saying, much before most of the Left, that the Algerian War could not be won and that Algeria should be given independence. On Vietnam, he hesitated because that war was similar to Korea in that it was a struggle against communism but similar to Algeria as well in that it was a war of national liberation against colonialism.

Central to his hesitancy on Vietnam was the notion that the communist problem was very different in Europe than in Asia in a way that is worth understanding today. In Europe, it was a military problem. The populations were on the side of the West and the problem was the Red Army. In Asia, it was impossible to separate the communist manipulation from national liberation and decolonization. This meant that in Asia communism had harnessed the power of nationalism, a force which Aron understood was of supreme importance.

From this understanding, we can also divine a more theoretical but extremely practical and relevant point about terrorism. Aron had a fascinating dialogue with the German philosopher Carl Schmitt. Schmitt was a great lawyer and political thinker who also happened to have been a Nazi, to have been the head of the bar association under Hitler, and as a result he was more or less put aside after the war. In his later years in the 1960s, Schmitt wrote a little book called *The Theory of the Partisan* (1963). In this book, he said that because one no longer wants to acknowledge that their enemies have any moral status, as states did in the interstate world after

Westphalia, now in the name of humanity one has absolute enemies that one wants to destroy completely.

Aron, in the second volume in his great book on Clausewitz, said that Schmitt falls into the cardinal error against which Clausewitz warned, defining a fight or a fighter by a method—namely, terror or terrorism. There is, he emphasized, a dialectic between subversion and repression: one may destroy terrorists, but their main tactic is to bring more repression in order to mobilize potential supporters.

This formula is very relevant to the struggle against terrorism. As the German sociologist Georg Simmel put it, there is in any bilateral conflict a critical third party—either an arbiter, an umpire, a state, or an interested spectator. The question of whether it makes sense for one's goals to destroy any given force rests less on the direct effect than on how that action will be perceived by the third party, usually the population in dispute or the international community. As Aron emphasized in his study of Clausewitz, politics and political questions are always paramount.

Interestingly, Schmitt, in the penultimate paragraph of his book, has a very troubling proposition that implies this dialectic. He says that World War I started as an interstate war between normal enemies, and it turned into a transnational civil war between absolute enemies. “And who will know how to prevent the appearance of an analogous and infinitely more intense mode of new and unexpected types of hostility whose translation into action will give birth to unexpected incarnations of a new type of partisan?” This is almost a prophesy about the emergence of al-Qaeda and its tactic of suicide bombings.

Aron and the Post-Cold War

Now, of course, we are in a new kind of world, but many of Aron's lessons remain relevant. We now have a new kind of peace: there is no war within the West, but there are many conflicts, especially civil conflicts, in the world beyond the West. It seems clear that between mature constitutional democracies, for whatever reason, war is not conceivable. And there are these new types of war with new types of enemies—civil war, the spread of fundamentalism everywhere, and terrorist networks.

Aron died in 1983, and we do not know what he would have said about this new situation, but I am certain of one thing: he would maintain the primacy of politics. He would still see any struggle in the context of the political objectives and consequences, but what interplay with the interstate model, what combination of action and moderation he would have analyzed and recommended, of course, I cannot say.

But I can say that Aron did not have a sense of the great crisis of modern society, of the downside of globalization. I think he was a believer in progress through technological advance and through industrial society. He had studied the hopes of the 19th century on this point, and he had something of that optimism. He talked about the struggle against blind allegiance, but he did not have to confront the problem of what to do about fanatical fundamentalist religion.

Similarly, he may have been right about international law in the strict sense, even perhaps about the weakness of the power of international institutions, but he did not talk much about the

indisputable evolution of norms, of what is considered normal. It seems to me that war in the classical sense—if you cannot negotiate, you go to war for the same objectives—has been de-legitimized and, on the other hand, now with these new kinds of opponents, the earlier version, a “just war,” is being re-legitimized.

So there are now important new theoretical issues to confront. We very much need to overcome the strict duality between the civil order inside the state and the anarchical state of nature outside, in favor of what Johns Hopkins Professor David Calleo calls a semi-constitutional view of international relations. This view rejects the idea that either there is a tribunal or police, a supreme authority that would be a world state—which is impossible—or there is pure anarchy. There is the need for these norms to be expressed in deliberation and dialogue and there is a need to recognize that the solution is more hybrid and more complicated than during the Cold War. We have now a kind of mixed system—on the one hand we have a *de facto* alliance of democracies; on the other hand we have a concert of the great powers with a much more intrusive presence both of small states and of non-governmental organizations.

Or, to put it more simply, we have a coexistence of states that have their sovereignty, but whose autonomy is limited. It is limited in particular by the new dimension of human rights which confers on humanity the right and indeed the duty to intervene in states that abuse their people. Such interventions cannot be purely arbitrary, decided by one country. And so, the process for deciding on such interventions needs rethinking and reformulation. We do not find that in Aron, above all because he died before the end of the Cold War and secondly because his very sharp analysis was ill at ease with these ambiguous situations that mix the international and the domestic, law and force.

Still, Raymond Aron is sadly missed in a situation that is more complex than the Cold War. We need someone who would warn against the twin dangers of triumphalism and pessimism, of adventurism and passivity, of Manichaeism and relativism. We have no lack of terrible simplifiers, to use Burckhardt’s expression, nor of premature synthesizers. But Aron’s clarity, his combination of passion and moderation, and his awareness both of insoluble tensions and of uncertain but indispensable choices will inspire us as long as we still have politics in this world.