

Recalling Raymond Aron and George Orwell (oral)

Both Raymond Aron and George Orwell disliked the peculiar vocabulary introduced by Marxist intellectuals, like “objective allies”. And yet, they were “objective allies” against the form of reasoning and writing practised by these intellectuals. When one sees a quotation which reads “I think Sartre is a bag of wind and I am going to give him a good boot”, one is immediately reminded of Raymond Aron and his *The Opium of Intellectuals*, and one remembers his estrangement from Sartre after the war.

In fact, the quote is by Orwell, in a letter of October 1948 to his publisher Frederic Warburg, who had also just published a translation of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Réflexions sur la question juive* [1946] (*Portrait of the Antisemite* in that 1948 translation). In his review, which appeared in the *Observer* in November, Orwell mocked Sartre’s naïve faith in the proletariat in a way which Aron – himself a Jew, who knew better – would not have disowned: “We are solemnly informed that antisemitism is almost unknown among the working class. It is a malady of the bourgeoisie”.

The easy way of defining Raymond Aron and George Orwell’s convergence is of course to resort to the concept of anti-totalitarianism. More prosaically, avoiding the use of these big words, I would say that what fundamentally united them was their refusal to deny what their eyes showed them. Their refusal to twist the facts to make them conform to a pre-ordained pattern, like the archetypal Marxist telling them that “antisemitism is almost unknown among the working class”. Examples abound of course in *Animal Farm* and *1984*, and many readily spring to mind.

But I would like to turn to a lesser-known work, *Démocratie et totalitarisme*, first published by Raymond Aron as part of his trilogy based on his lectures given in 1957-1958. The trilogy comprised *18 leçons sur la société industrielle*, *La lutte des classes* and *Démocratie et totalitarisme*, in chronological order of publication. I would especially like to concentrate on Chapter 15 of *Démocratie et totalitarisme*, “Du totalitarisme” (“On Totalitarianism”), which gives a thorough examination of the question which also fascinated Orwell, namely the analogy or difference between the two totalitarianisms of the mid-20th century. Orwell died too soon, in January 1950, to be able

to benefit from the light thrown on the subject by Hanna Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951, but in 1954 Raymond Aron produced a detailed review in the journal *Critique* simply entitled “L’essence du totalitarisme”. When he wrote in the introduction “Le style de M^{me} Arendt ressemble à celui d’Orwell dans *1984* » (« M^{me} Arendt’s styles resembles that of Orwell in *1984* »), these were of course words of praise. The review was full of approbation for the scholarly approach followed by the author, but he pointed out that her conclusion that the Nazi and Soviet totalitarianisms were at bottom similar was not entirely convincing. Hence his re-examination of all the elements pleading for and against her thesis – that of a similarity – in “Du totalitarisme”, in which he openly mentioned her seminal work. If I may be allowed a colloquial expression, I would argue that in his high-flying discussion Raymond Aron sometimes resorts to the solid common-sense approach so often found in Orwell: the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Here is for instance what he writes of the arguments of those who say that the two totalitarianisms are deadly enemies (my translation):

Admittedly, according to the communist ideology, fascism is the embodiment of all that is bad in history and base in human nature. Admittedly, according to the fascist ideology, the communist is the devil incarnate, the absolute fiend. But, that on one side the ideology should be universalist and humanitarian, and on the other nationalist, racialist and anything but humanitarian, does not prove that these men, in the name of contrary ideologies, do not resort to comparable practices.

So, is the enmity between the various forms of totalitarianism pure make-believe, as in *1984*, if their fundamental practices are the same? Raymond Aron does not believe so, because he argues that the totalitarian practice is a means to an end. In these totalitarian regimes the end is always abhorrent, but there are important differences in the degree of horror. He writes of the Soviet and Nazi totalitarianisms:

In the final analysis, the difference between these two phenomena is an essential one, whatever the similarities. The difference is of the essence to the cause which drives both undertakings. In one case, the outcome is the labour camp; in the other the gas chamber. In one case, one sees at work a will to build a novel regime, perhaps a new

man, whatever the means; in the other a properly demoniacal will to destroy another pseudo-race.

Interestingly for us today retrospectively, Raymond Aron concludes his trilogy with reflections which suspend judgement on the possible future of the Soviet regime. His central argument is not that the Soviet population may one day insist that butter comes before guns – which is what we can loosely describe as Gorbachev’s own final opinion and option after the enormously costly missile race imposed by Reagan – but that liberty may somehow some day appear as more important than both guns and butter. As he points out, the Communist regime gave the Soviet Union “*grandeur, power and constant economic progress*”, giving the Russian people “*the pride of being the second country in the world with the conviction of becoming the first tomorrow*”. Therefore, when he was delivering his lectures (1957-1958), there was no indication that the population had an urgent thirst for personal liberty to the detriment of what it saw as a reasonably satisfying political and economic situation.

We can compare that with the extremely interesting review of Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* by Orwell in April 1944, in which Orwell doubts whether Professor Hayek’s “*emphasis on liberty rather than on security*” will get a significant following, predicting that “*the drift towards collectivism is bound to continue if popular opinion has any say in the matter*”.

My point here is that both Orwell in 1944 and Raymond Aron in 1957-1958 had their doubts about the aspiration to liberty as a motor for action among the populace.

I would like to end this inevitably superficial overview by rising to the heights of Raymond Aron’s thought again and sheltering behind his prudent warning:

There remains the hypothesis that liberty might be the strongest and most constant aspiration of all mankind, but the word “liberty” is sufficiently ambiguous to require further study.