

A Modern Tocqueville

Politics and History: Selected Essays

by Raymond Aron, collected and translated by Miriam Bernheim Conant, *New York: The Free Press, 1978. xxx + 274 pp. \$15.95.*

In Defense of Decadent Europe, by

Raymond Aron; translated from the French by Stephen Cox, *South Bend, Ind.: Regnery/Gateway, Inc., 1979. xviii + 297 pp. \$14.95.*

RAYMOND ARON has long been a thorn in the side of the Marxists. He retired in 1977 as columnist for *Le Figaro*, from which he offered lively and pungent commentary on world affairs, and by which he supplemented an extensive list of book publications. Aron is a sage of the middle way. His adherence to the democratic path, to the free societies of Western Europe and of the United States, and his trenchant critiques of the Soviet system and the naive worshippers of the Marxist credo, have made Aron an effective dissenter from our fashionable ideologies. *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (translated into English in 1957) inaugurated this effort, and these two works restate the case for the recent past.

Both *Politics and History* and *In Defense of Decadent Europe* may be read as convenient companion volumes, the one a theoretical preface to the other. The essays range widely, from "Thucydides and the Historical Narrative" to "The Social Responsibility of the Philosopher." But, obliquely and directly, they elaborate a common theme, one that illuminates the discussion of the contemporary world in Aron's glance at "decadent Europe." Three essays in particular—"The Philosophy of History," "Sociology and the Philosophy of Human Rights," and "The Liberal Definition of Freedom"—best illustrate Aron's point of view.

History, to Aron, is a flexible, contingent, open-ended process. At every angle it reveals the unpredictable, variable, accidental turn of events. This perspective, he believes, is the triumph of the scientific, empirical study of the past. For the more we place the data of events under the microscopic scrutiny of history, the more clearly is revealed the possibility of alternatives and the opportunity for choice. No longer tenable, then, is the concept of universal history or any monolithic containment of the past by an all-embracing superstructure imposed on it. "There is no coherent historical whole, no possibility of conceiving man or of seeing a single idea in the time process."

Such a perspective of the human drama has often smoothed the path of nihilists. But Aron writes very much like the American pragmatists who applied the concept of the "open universe" to philosophy and life. For this pragmatic understanding of the world makes possible the course of human progress, a progress wrought by pragmatic adjustments to the world, by intelligence, by science and technology. Aron is consistently the defender of the open society that makes these applications possible. It is the traditional liberties, defined in the late eighteenth century by the United States and France, that liberated free thought, individual enterprise in the marketplace, and democratic participation in the life of the state. But as Aron knows, the free West sprang also from its sense that an abstract "nature" endowed human beings with basic rights. Here a curious universalism remained. Can free society maintain its legitimacy when the modern intelligence discredits such apparent anomalies as the rights of free speech and free thought? And what happens when a new kind of universalism, the universalism of Marxism-Leninism, arises to redefine the meaning of human rights?

The modern world wars between the spirit of Marx and the spirit of Tocqueville. For it was the French aristocrat,

enamoured of American democracy, who best expressed the hope that the materialistic core of democratic societies, curiously mixed with religion and idealism, would secure more for its people in personal freedoms as well. Aron believes that history has confirmed this hope, and *Decadent Europe* demonstrates it. What disturbs Aron, however, is that the whole Tocquevillian ideal is under attack, even by those who have experienced it most fully. Examining the several United Nations Charters on human rights, he finds that formal freedoms have yielded completely to economic and social "rights." Freedom from the state, the classical foundation of formal freedoms, yields to an enumerated list of the responsibilities of the state to provide for the material wants and needs of its people. The intellectual community joins in this plea. Modern sociological thought has made "noble ideals" the new universal rights and has "conferred on economic and social rights a status equivalent to that of traditional rights." For a long time the two notions of rights posed only minor problems; economic prosperity advanced in those nations that honored formal freedoms and confirmed Tocqueville's best hopes for the democratic future. But Aron, surveying the contemporary world, must ask the question: "In a revolutionary age, do the rights of man represent something more than a luxury of wealthy nations?"

The international ascendancy of Marxist ideology helps explain the crisis of formal freedoms. Marx, cloaked in the armaments of a universalist philosophy of history, tried to show how economic and social inequality must worsen under capitalism. He taught that the alienation produced by work in capitalist conditions cannot be ameliorated by political adjustments alone, by endowing the disfranchised with the formal freedoms democracies bestow, and that replacement of the capitalist order alone can address the grievances of the working classes. No more persuasive or convenient rationale

ever existed for the course of totalitarianism, the great temptation of the modern state. Now Marxism takes on a spirit profoundly foreign to that of liberal democracy, a will to reform and remake the world in a new image. And all who have exercised this will have found that the greatest obstacles in its way were the formal freedoms. What tolerance could these be allowed when history dictated the revolutionary path to classlessness? Does the Marxist understanding of history, Aron asks, when applied to the policies of state, necessarily entail the absence of political freedoms? The all-powerful party of the Bolsheviks may not have been a dictum of Marx, but, Aron writes, "it nevertheless remains difficult to conceive the elimination of class antagonisms, the end of the duality between society and state, without an absolute authority, without something like what is called the dictatorship of the proletariat."

These reflections clearly inform Aron's discussion of Soviet Russia, the free West, and the United States. In 1949, in his book *The Vital Center*, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., wrote: "The Soviet Union can do very little any more to disenchant its believers; it has done about everything in the book already." Twenty years later, Aron says this:

If the virtues of an economic regime are measured by its capacity to answer the wishes of the population, organize the rational allocation of resources, and efficiently provide the goods necessary to the physical and moral well-being of individual people, the Soviet experience remains to this day the most spectacular *failure* in history.

Strange it is that Aron feels so compelled to pen these sentiments, and to extend the case against the Soviets in the realm of imperial world politics as well. Why should so manifest a fact require a book of some 250 pages to attest its truth? Aron, it should be noted, was writing *In Defense of Decadent Europe* on the eve of

the March 1978 French elections, when the prospect of communist victories at the polls was the story of the day. What troubled Aron above all was the persistence of the "Marxist Vulgate," the Western intellectuals, workers, and others who yet see the Marxist alternative as the only workable program for social justice and economic equality. Aron punctures this illusion at every turn. In whatever category or measure of national well-being, with the singular exception of military power, the Soviet Union pales beside the Western democracies. The facts are plain enough, but where analysts disagree, and where Aron strives ardently to enforce his own thesis, is on the causal factors of this contrast.

Aron's outline extends from the matters treated in his book of theoretical essays. Now the pragmatist, the philosopher of history who discredits all philosophies of history, asks the question, What happens when a society resolves to force onto the open, contingent elements of history a super-reality, an abstract super-structure, and a value-system to which every category of life must be made to conform? Marxism-Leninism, as practiced by the Soviet Union, is the great historical experiment of this century to do just this. The Soviet leadership, Aron says, knows how it could effect immediate improvements in its faltering agricultural system, but it clings tenaciously to the concept of collectivization and resists even its own examples of successful farming on private land. But this tenacity is the essence of Soviet life. It holds to a nineteenth-century dogma that is antiquated to the core. "In the Soviet Union, Marxism-Leninism still sets out to be a total faith." The deprivation of the masses, the tyranny of intellectual conformity, the privileged life of the workers "representatives" in the Communist Party, the drab and joyless existence of Russian socialism—all of these, Aron contends, are the burdens of an ideology that none dares question. So Aron finds it

quite appropriate to paraphrase Marx on religion to describe the conditions of Soviet life:

Marxism-Leninism (*religion*) is the sigh of a creature weighed down by misery, the soul of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of an age without spirit. It is the opium of the people. The real happiness of the people demands that Marxism-Leninism (*religion*) be suppressed as the *illusory* happiness of the people. To demand that we give up the illusions about our own situation is to demand that we renounce a situation that rests on illusions.

If the experience of communism in Eastern Europe is not so severe, it is because here the ideology was imposed from without. But Aron takes little comfort from this fact, for it is the ideology that always tempts. The Marxist Vulgate still finds in Marxism-Leninism "an all-embracing explanation for all hardship and all injustice." So long as capitalism thrives, then, the scripture reads, there must be social injustice. And the more urgently we stress the eradication of social inequality, the more the state looms as the vehicle of our salvation. For amid the diversities of the European communist parties there lies the common denominator of a program of collectivization, welfare, and income redistribution.

In this respect, Western Europe is paying the price of its virtues. The economic "miracle" of the post-World War II era has outpaced the reduction in social inequalities. In relation to the affluence wrought by a free economic system, these inequalities cry out for greater attention. To those who place all priority here, the Marxist temptation often proves irresistible. Aron never quarrels with the ideals of social justice, or with the proximate measures of economic equality, only with the historical fallacy that the oppression of the working class is the invariable by-product of capitalism. On this matter,

above all, Marx was wrong and Tocqueville correct.

Aron worries greatly about his Europe. It has lost confidence in itself and gives too much credence to its strident critics from the left. The great temptation remains powerful, and so long as it does, so will the threat to Europe's tradition of formal freedoms. And like a twentieth-century Tocqueville, Aron looks to the United States, not a flawless model, but something of an inspiration nonetheless. For no society has better preserved the precarious balance of freedom and economic well-being for so many of its people. Aron poses this question:

Will Great Britain remain a free society if it does not halt its economic decline? Will Italy preserve its freedom once Enrico Berlinguer's party becomes a participant in government? What would be the fate of a France ruled by Georges Marchais? On the other hand, who would not venture to bet that the United States *will* elect a president in 1980, and in 1984, and that—in the foreseeable future—it *will* remain a free society?

It was Tocqueville also who warned that "despotism often presents itself as the repairer of all the ills suffered, the supporter of just rights, defender of the oppressed, and founder of order." Aron, too, knows the difference between words and reality.

Reviewed by J. DAVID HOEVELER, JR.