

Review

**Raymond Aron's
Liberalism: Two Accounts**

A review essay of
Nathan Orlando,
*Raymond Aron and His
Dialogues in the Age
of Ideologies*

and

Iain Stewart, *Raymond
Aron and Liberal Thought
in the Twentieth Century*

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I: INTRODUCTION

In the Introduction to *Raymond Aron and His Dialogues in an Age of Ideologies* Nathan Orlando insists that there are two interrelated crises. There is a crisis in understanding the role that liberalism played in Raymond Aron's political thinking and there is a larger crisis caused by the West's inability or unwillingness to defend liberalism from its many critics. The second crisis is clearly more important and more immediate but will not be discussed. Instead, the focus is on the issue of Raymond Aron's liberalism. Put bluntly, Orlando maintains that other scholars have tended to undervalue Aron's liberalism and he contends that one of the most recent examples of this is Iain Stewart's *Raymond Aron and Liberal Thought in the Twentieth Century*. These two important books confront the issue of Aron's liberalism in different ways—one as dialogue and the other as context. This review essay is concerned with examining the merits of these two accounts of Aron's liberalism and is not intended as a general review of those books.

This review essay progresses in four more stages: 2) Orlando's charge, 3) Orlando's account of Aron's liberalism, 4) Stewart's account of Aron's liberalism, 5) an overall assessment of Orlando's and Stewart's books.

II: ORLANDO'S CHARGE

Orlando makes it clear in the Introduction that he has very little use for theory. He contends that theories are the attempts to provide a general if not universal account and he maintains that the blueprint for such theories is found in natural science. The problem is that political scientists are mistaken to regard politics as a science and they are wrong to think they can provide a universal theory that can predict the future, just like natural scientists do. The two political scientists who Orlando singles out for criticism are Alexander Wendt and Kenneth Waltz. Orlando objects to both because the two believe that they can offer a "new way of viewing the world" that will avoid the mistakes of the past (Orlando 2023, pp. 1-3). Orlando suggests that his complaint is not with theory in general; only in politics. Orlando then turns to Raymond Aron and insists that Aron was not a general theorist and instead provided specific accounts of particular historical problems. In this light, Orlando praises Aron scholars Daniel J. Mahoney and Brian C. Anderson for placing Aron in "the Western canon of political thought" (Orlando 2023, p. 19). But he criticizes the "intellectual historian" Iain Stewart for "missing the mark" in his recent book *Raymond Aron and Liberal*

Thought in the Twentieth Century. While Orlando praises Stewart's book as being "truly impressive in erudition" and he acknowledges that Stewart correctly notes the considerable influence that Max Weber and Carl Schmitt had on Aron, he criticizes Stewart for privileging "certain elements of Aron's life" and more telling for making Aron into a "Cold War Liberal." Orlando maintains that this reduces Aron to someone who had nothing positive to say about liberalism—and that "Aron only ever said 'no' to the ideas of others" (Ibid.). Orlando also criticizes Stewart for ignoring "the essence and significance of Aron's thought" although he grants that Stewart was "right to point towards Aron's unremitting opposition to totalitarianism and its handmaiden ideology" (Orlando 2023, pp. 20-21). Orlando not only faults Stewart for *Raymond Aron and Liberal Thought in the Twentieth Century*, he also complained about Stewart's attribution of "Cold War Liberalism" in "The Origins of the 'End of Ideology?'" (Orlando 2023, pp. 144, 163; Stewart 2015). Orlando believes that in contrast to Stewart, he offers the proper understanding of Aron and he claims that he does so by providing three "dialogues": between Aron and Sartre, between Aron and de Gaulle, and between Aron and Hayek. It is only the two chapters on Aron and Hayek which are relevant here because it is primarily in these two chapters that Orlando takes up the main issue of Aron's liberalism

III: ORLANDO'S ACCOUNT OF ARON'S LIBERALISM

The title "In Defense of the Decadent West: Raymond Aron and Friedrich A. Hayek" tells the reader that Chapter 4 is more about the conversation between Aron and Hayek on the problems of the West than it is on liberalism. Orlando again attacks Stewart for his claim that Aron adopted a "Cold War Liberalism" and he claims that the dialogue with Hayek reveals Aron's "foundations of his political thought" (Orlando 2023, pp. 144-145). But most of the chapter focuses on the shared similarities between Aron and Hayek: "On many fronts, they were allied" (Orlando 2023, pp. 146-155). When Orlando does take up "The Case for Freedom", it is actually about "Themes of Rhetoric" (Orlando 2023, p. 156). Chapter 4 tells us much about the similarities between Aron and Hayek, but there is no account of liberalism per se and no real discussion of liberty. Instead, he promises that he will turn to the discussion of liberalism in the next chapter.

The title of Chapter 5 is more promising: "The Liberal Definition of Freedom" but more than half of the chapter is largely devoted to F. A. Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty*. It is to Orlando's credit that "Constituting Freedom", the first section of Chapter 5 is a rather full and mostly accurate account of Hayek's conception of freedom. He is correct to note that Hayek's notion is largely negative; that is, it is mostly "freedom from"—freedom from intrusions from the state. He is also correct to note that the state is the largest threat because it has the power to coerce and the most important freedom is the freedom from coercion. Finally, Orlando is also mostly correct to note that Hayek's economic background infuses his notion of freedom; that democracy is not an end but a means. But in the entire seven-page section we learn much about Hayek but nothing about Aron: he is mentioned once in connection with Hayek (Orlando 2023, pp. 171-178, 172). The next section "Freedom Unbound" is Orlando's continuation of Aron's critique of Hayek. Hayek's definition of freedom is the absence of coercion; according to Orlando, Aron thought that Hayek's conception of freedom was not wrong but "insufficient." In Orlando's view, "Aron aims to help us understand freedom a bit better" and he does so by distinguishing between freedom *from* and freedom *to*. Rather than explaining what Aron meant by this, Orlando discusses Prometheus, Francis Bacon, Charles Dickens, and Karl Marx. Rather than explain the difference between "real freedom" (economic freedom) and "formal freedom" (political freedom) Orlando returns to his discussion of Hayek (Orlando 2023, pp. 178-185).

The section "A Government of Men" is a further continuation of the exchange between Aron and Hayek; but the focus is on foreign policy and economics; not on Aron's conception of freedom. Orlando complained that Marx reduced freedom to economic freedom and Hayek "conflates all politics with economics." Orlando is certainly right to cite Aron's reply that "Politics is never reducible to economics" but is misleading when he asserted that "Hayek is an economist by training." That claim suggests Hayek thought about human interaction only in economic terms (Orlando 2023, p. 192). But Hayek certainly did think in social-political terms as well. The remainder of the section is on liberalism and not on liberty. Orlando con-

cludes “The Liberal Definition of Freedom” with a brief section in which he discusses Aron and Hayek’s “continuing conversation.” He notes that Aron resigned from the Mount Pelerin Society in 1961 over the Society’s “commitment to laissez-faire economics” but insisted that the two scholars continued their discussions into the 1960s. But as Orlando suggests, these discussions were about liberal democracy and not about freedom (Orlando 2023, pp. 204-205). The main emphasis of the chapter “The Liberal Definition of Freedom” was on liberalism and not on liberty and that it was devoted more to Hayek’s conception of liberalism than it was to that of Aron.

IV: STEWART’S ACCOUNT OF ARON’S LIBERALISM

Iain Stewart does not write much about freedom because his stated interest is in liberal thought. But it is important to examine the notion of “Cold War Liberalism” because Orlando regarded it as something negative. Such a defense of Stewart is beyond the scope of this review essay but a few words need to be said for clarification. Stewart’s main thesis appears to be that prior to the Second World War, Aron was a socialist and it was only after the War that his interest in liberalism replaced his earlier socialist tendencies. Whether this is correct is a matter for dispute; what is beyond contention is the fact that Aron saw the Soviet Union as a political threat and a danger to world peace and that he did become a “Cold War liberal” (Stewart 2021, pp. 79, 96, 112). Stewart wants us to rethink Aron and liberalism by pointing out that while Aron regarded himself as part of French political thinking, he was more of a product of Tocqueville than Durkheim. And that Aron was heavily influenced by Max Weber’s “ethics of responsibility” (Stewart 2021, pp. 200-201, 241-244). Stewart is definitely correct in his observation that “Aron’s significance in the history of liberal thought appears differently depending on the angle from which it is observed.” (Stewart 2021, p. 235). One may not always agree with what Stewart observed but one must agree that he was a most observant observer. That is something that Tocqueville, Weber, and Aron would have greatly appreciated.

V: OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Before turning to a general evaluation of the two books, I want to offer a few remarks about the account of liberalism in each of them. Although the titles of both books promise explorations of Aron’s liberalism, neither one actually delivers on that promise. Instead, they approach the issue of liberalism quite differently; Orlando writes about it mainly in relation to what other people thought of it and Aron’s responses. Stewart places liberalism in an historical context and argues that it was after the Second World War that Aron began to defend liberalism. It is in this sense that Stewart identified Aron as a “Cold War liberal” and this was a positive change rather than the negative connotation that Orlando suggested. Although both Orlando and Stewart are sympathetic to Aron’s political philosophy, Stewart captures Aron’s nuanced understanding of the meaning of liberalism better than Orlando. Both are generally rewarding to read but each suffers some interpretive flaws.

Stewart’s book most serious flaw is his misunderstanding of certain thinkers, including his misinterpretation of Dilthey’s conception of history and Karl Jaspers’ notion of the individual (Stewart 2021, pp. 56, 59). Vilfredo Pareto was never a “neo-Machiavellian” and Aron had a far more nuanced reception to Leo Strauss’ philosophy (Stewart 2021, pp. 159, 191). But Stewart errs in particular with his comments especially regarding Carl Schmitt and even more so about Max Weber. While there is no question that Schmitt was an anti-liberal thinker, the question about Weber is far more complicated than Stewart’s assertion (Stewart 2021, pp. 16, 159). More importantly, Weber did not have a “relativist epistemology” nor did he embrace a “nominalist sociological epistemology.” Weber believed that facts could be objectively established (Stewart 2021, pp. 190, 177, 67, 196). Nor did Weber have “relativist and nihilist tendencies” (Stewart 2021, p. 199). Values are subjective but that does not mean that they are relative. In fact, Weber insisted that values were among the most important parts of being human.

Orlando's book also has a number of questionable assertions: to offer three. First, Orlando's title emphasizes ideology, but he fails to provide a definition, and does not offer a history; he does not even mention Karl Mannheim and his book on ideology and utopia. Second, Orlando claimed that Aron and Sartre "received a superior education from some of the greatest neo-Kantian and neo-Hegelian scholars of their time" (Orlando 2023, p. 13), but neither of them studied under such great neo-Kantians as Heinrich Rickert or Ernst Cassirer. Third, Orlando referred to Ludwig von Mises as the "godfather of what came to be known as the Austrian School of economics" (Orlando 2023, p. 146). This ignores the fact that it was started by Carl Menger in the 1880s in his conflict with Gustav Schmoller of the German Historical School, and was continued in the next four decades by Menger and then by Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk and Friedrich von Wieser. It might be more accurate to say that von Mises and Hayek were grandsons of the original Austrian School of economics. What Orlando wrote is not exactly wrong; but it is highly misleading. It seems that Orlando is more concerned with dialogue and conversation and less by inquiry and investigation—more style than substance; more rhetoric than philosophy. Instead, he proves what he set out to disprove—contrary to what Orlando contends, Aron was not an Aristotelian promoter of prudence. Rather, he was a Socratic critic always asking questions. In his conclusion, Orlando regrets that Aron had no "school." and that is because as Orlando admits, Aron asks questions, he examines flaws, he confronts dogma, he disrupts beliefs, he challenges convictions, he disrupts and debunks (Orlando 2023, pp. 309-313). Earlier, he listed almost a half dozen of ideas that Aron challenged. As Orlando succinctly put it: "He [Aron] stood against." (Orlando 2023, p. 143). However, Orlando was wrong about Aron and the lesson that he learned from the French minister. Rather than being "embarrassed about his response to the minister's question "What would you do?" Aron proudly made that a guiding principle (Orlando 2023, pp. 14, 16, 39, 144, 321; Adair-Toteff 2019). One may admire Orlando for his passion for Aron's thinking and one can applaud him for providing a perspective into Aron's political thought (Orlando 2023, p. 143).¹ Similarly, one may admire Stewart's extensive knowledge about the age in which Aron wrote and one can praise him for providing a vivid picture of Aron's thinking. Orlando offers a good intellectual debate and Stewart provides an excellent intellectual biography, but if one is seeking a compelling account of Aron's liberalism, then one needs to look elsewhere.

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1 Sylvie Masure quoted from *Le Marxisme de Marx* and provided a translation: "quasi-religious respect can sometimes go too far, even in science (Masure 2015, p. 223). Max Weber would suggest less "Leidenschaft" (hot passion) and more "Augenmaß" (cool distance) See "Politik als Beruf."