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Raymond Aron and the End of Europe

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There are two basic questions that people who write about Europe get asked more than any others. First: Is Europe still Europe? When Americans read in the papers about the wave of mosque-burnings after the murder of Theo van Gogh in Holland last November, those who sometime visit Europe will wonder whether this kind of thing goes on often, and whether it has any connection to the tranquil Europe where they vacation. Those who haven't been to Europe lately may be thunderstruck to hear that there are mosques in the Netherlands at all. The second question is of interest to all Americans in the wake of the Iraq war: Is Europe still on our side?

These questions go together. The European Union—which now has 25 member states, including 10 new ones mostly from the old Eastern bloc--is supposed to evolve into an "ever closer union," at least in the minds of its leaders. They eventually want a federal government, with a president and all the trappings of a regular republic. With some friction and much foreboding, a unitary constitution is being submitted for the approval of the member states over the next year. There are referenda in France and Holland seven weeks from now, and they may lose.

But European voters do increasingly tell pollsters they feel a "European identity." When you ask them what they mean by that, they generally mention one thing or another that illustrates differences from the United States: Europe's oldness, perhaps, or welfare states, or its secularism. In other words, they mention Europe's institutions. And this is the big problem. Because those institutions have proved hard to adapt to two phenomena that are characteristic of our global age: (1) open markets, and (2) broad demographic change, including large migrations. There is no prospect of managing that change unless the continent's social institutions (starting with its welfare states) are reformed. Europeans are afraid that such reforms mean "Americanization." As they see it, the experts and economists keep telling them that they must destroy their continent to save it. So Europe is now--defensively—asserting an identity without a particularly clear idea of what that identity is.

Raymond Aron

I'd like to spend our time this afternoon trying to figure out what European identity is, and how much of it can reasonably be preserved. There are many ways to do this. My plan, a somewhat arbitrary one, is to use the work of Raymond Aron, the French political scientist, philosopher, sociologist, and historian who died in 1983 and would have turned 100 last month. For the benefit of those in the audience who are under, say, 30, Aron was a brilliant young student at the Ecole Normal Supérieure, studied in Germany during the first Hitler years, established himself as a top-flight academic philosopher, fled to England with De Gaulle, where he was editor in chief of the main resistance publication, *La France libre*. After the war, at age 40, despite never having written a real news article in his life, he went to work at Le Figaro. He never left journalism, but he did become professor of sociology at the Sorbonne in 1955. He closed out his career at the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, and founded the truly great French quarterly *Commentaire*.

Aron was, for the French right, what Jean-Paul Sartre was to the French left—a standard-bearer matters of both day-to-day political position-taking … and deep theoretical reflection. Sartre, incidentally, was Aron's youthful friend, and will also have his centenary this year, a couple months from now. Their friendship did not survive Aron's conversion to anti-Communism. He saw in Stalin's Russia the same kind of imperialistic insatiability that he had seen in Hitler's Germany in the 1930s. Aron, I would say, was a rightist only in a French sense. He was probably the pre-eminent Atlanticist in post-war France, keen to correct what he saw as a generalized French ignorance of the United States—although he was not an unthinking supporter of the U.S., either, particularly during Vietnam. That said, he applied the same generally anti-colonialist attitude to France, particularly during the Algerian war. We would consider him either on the far right of the left or the far left of the right.

Aron wrote about 40 books of sociology, history, philosophy, and journalism, and there are another dozen posthumous collections of articles and essays. He has been extremely well anthologized—I highly recommend the 800-page behemoth edited a decade ago by Christian Bachelier called *A History of the 20th Century*. But the works of Aron are a very large country--and I am a stranger in most of it. I hope you'll forgive me if my reading of him is selective. And the last thing I want to do is to assume what position Aron would have taken on issues affecting Europe today. As the Harvard professor Harvey C. Mansfield said recently about Aron, we do not "have his advice; we only have his wisdom offered for previous emergencies."

Aron's wisdom was, if you'll pardon the expression, phenomenological. He cared about things and actions more than he did about ideological labels. I'll give you an example. A key theme in much of his work--and one that I'll return to before the end of this talk—is that until very late in the 20th century, people were judging events according to 19th-century conceptions. Particularly intellectuals, who had an understanding of socialism that time had already shown to be largely mythological. "In theory," Aron wrote, "a revolution is defined as a liberation. Yet the revolutions of the 20th century seem, if not revolutions of enslavement, at the very least revolutions of authority."

Decadence

And he did not spare those he admired from such condemnation–Léon Blum, for instance, the leftist prime minister who led France's Popular Front government in the mid-1930s. Aron said: "Leon Blum was a superior man, but his intellectual formation dated from before 1914." That is, he lacked the understanding of aggression surpassing all rationality that Aron had come to know in Hitler's Germany in the early 1930s, and that he would later recognize in Stalin's Russia. In March 1936, Blum's government opposed Germany's re-occupation of the Rhine by calling it "unacceptable." This is a word that Aron held in particular contempt. As he put it, "To say that something is unacceptable was to say that one accepted it." Again, Aron deeply admired Blum. But he noted with dismay that he seemed proud of putting up no resistance. After the German re-occupation, Blum said, "No one suggested using military force. That is a sign of humanity's moral progress, and the socialist party is proud to have contributed to progress." Aron added: "This moral progress meant the end of the French system of alliances, and almost certain war."

We hear an echo of Blum's words in the self-congratulatory speech that Spanish prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero gave on the first anniversary of the March 11 Madrid bombings, which brought his Socialist government to power and caused the pullout of Spanish troops from the Iraq coalition. In the course of a speech in which he praised his government's "inimitable integrity," Zapatero condemned those who questioned his decision, warning that they would be forgotten. "We reserve our memory for those noble and beautiful things that unite us, that make us rise up and advance in the worst moments, and that earn the admiration of other peoples. Because anyone who looks at us with just and objective eyes cannot fail to recognize the merit of Spain's actions."

Again, I don't mean to enlist Aron on any side of any question. But I do mean to show that, long ago, he was mulling over themes that seem to the rest of us to have cropped up only the day before yesterday. In a book he published in the 1970s called *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, he praised Western Europe's wide scope for freedom and its superior economic management. He preferred it not only to the Soviet Union–of course–but also to the United States. But he warned that democracies tend to push their taste for comfort and freedom beyond what is tolerable for national unity. Elsewhere, he wrote, "Democracies have to do more to justify themselves than simply invoke the values that their adversaries hold in contempt; democracies have to show themselves capable of the virtues on which totalitarian regimes claim a monopoly." Aron even dealt specifically with the theme we're taking up today, the idea that Europe was somehow being turned into something other than itself. In a 1981 interview, he noted that the Soviet Union's goal was to turn France into a place like Poland. Asked to lay odds on the chance that France would remain France, he refused. He said, "When the choice is between survival and death, you don't calculate. You fight."

A big quandary for Europe–in Aron's times as now–is that, as he said, "It is hard to be strong politically when you are weak militarily." Europe's fate in the Cold War was partly out of its hands. The continent was subject to the fluctuating strength of the U.S., the fluctuating goodwill of the USSR, and of course the moods of respective Euro governments. In my view, the entire point of the EU is to bring Europe's fate back into its own hands. How would Aron have seen it? He had both allegiances. He was a French patriot who was quite at home in all of European culture. But certain of Aron's preoccupations can tell us something about Europe's potential to recapture some control of its fate.

One is that Aron had what you might call an awe at the binding power of nationalism. He would probably consider the European project in big trouble if it could not harness it. He wrote tellingly about nationalism on the eve of World War I, and its superiority over the alternative–which at that time was the *inter*national socialist movement that Aron himself grew up in. "The war of 1914," he wrote, "was a rude shock for the socialist religion. Because it showed that in spite of words and appearances, at the inevitable moment of choice, the country won out over the party–effortlessly. In an instant, patriotism ruled over crowds of people who the day before had proclaimed their indifference to their homeland, and their undivided devotion to the Workers' International."

A very similar leakage of Europeanist passions back into nation states is clearly visible today. Two examples. For the last decade, immigration has been the most passionately debated issue at bars and over dinner tables–but not in Brussels. Yet if this isn't a Europe-wide policy issue, then nothing is. European integration has erased most border controls between countries. You'd think that was progress, but almost every country behaves as if it is getting the short end of the stick. Northern Europeans complain that Italians are allowing Mediterranean immigrants to pass through to countries with more generous welfare states. Italy complains it foots the bill for guarding a vulnerable coastline. Swedes complain that Danish welfare cuts are dumping undesirable immigrants. And everyone complains that Spain's instant legalization of thousands of immigrants last winter is exporting social problems. Harmonization of immigration policies is imperative. And yet it is political suicide for most nationally elected politicians to propose ceding that authority to Brussels.

Another example: the killing of Theo van Gogh last November was news internationally, but the concrete political debate over it was limited to the Netherlands. The Dutch minister of the interior battled to keep his job. The immigration minister fought with the justice minister. And everyone proposed legislation in the national parliament. But that was it. A lot of Dutch politicians talked about the "international dimension" of Islamist terrorism, but this talk was purely a way of passing the buck. There was no European dimension to the response to the van Gogh killing and the riots that followed it. In fact, two days after the murder, Dutch prime minister Jan Peter Balkenende went to Brussels to address European heads of state (the Dutch held the EU presidency at the time) and didn't even mention it.

Aron was given to wondering whether NATO was not the beginning of an erosion of national sovereignty. In very clever apercu, he noted Europeans' desire to have it both ways. Europeans in the Cold War were searching for an organization that simultaneously, "surpasses them and respects them." But when push comes to shove–as we see in the EU and as we saw in the difficulties surrounding the formation of the Iraq coalition two years ago–the respect is more important than the surpassing.

A Fictive Economy

There is one thing that separates Aron from the run of political journalists in France and the United States. He actually knew something about how a modern economy worked. Although he was prescient about the global economy, he did not live to see globalization in full flower. What would he have made of it? We can get an approximation by way of an analogy. The change in economic organization that results as we move from a state-based to a global economy is *structurally* similar to the change in diplomacy as one moves from a state-based to an Empire-based foreign policy ("Empire," by the way, is a word that Aron was quite comfortable using to describe both of the nuclear-armed blocs in the Cold War--he called the United States an imperial republic--but he did not use the term, by any means, the way today's hard left uses it). For Aron, the Eastern European nations in the aftermath of the war were only "fictively restored." There was no real Poland in 1945--there was a space run by the Soviet army in which Poles lived. "Political units, such as they exist according to international law, are national," he wrote. "Military units, such as they exist in reality, are imperial."

The national economies of Western Europe have today become similarly "fictive". Nowhere is this clearer than in the parts of Europe that present themselves as most *typical*. You go to an Italian wine town and think, "Wow! Now I'm in the real Italy!" But then you realize the winery is owned by Germans, the town is inhabited by English vacationers, and the people who clean the dishes in the French-owned restaurant are all Romanians. The Italians who used to live there have had to move to poorer towns, maybe along some highway near fast-food restaurants.

This is just life in the global economy, but it matters more to Europeans than it does to Americans. The ability to control a national economic space is central to creating a welfare state, and the welfare state, as I have said, is central to European identity. You see the paradox. There is a very interesting book by the Harvard economists Alberto Alesina and Edward Glaeser, called *Fighting Poverty in the U.S. and Europe*. It compares American and European welfare policies, and finds that one of the very important reasons that American benefits are relatively low is that America is both a diverse and an immigrant-based country. The taxpaying natives suspect that their money is going to people who are *not like them*, and may be ripping them off. Whether American voters are right or wrong, they will not vote for European-level welfare benefits. The question is whether, as Europe becomes demographically more like America–both through immigration, and through internal migration within the EU–it will lower its benefits. The answer is, *yes*, it will.

Demographic change as a policy issue did not really enter public discussion until after Aron died–in fact, in some places, it is creeping into the debate only now--but it is so central to Europeans' idea of what is de-Europeanizing them that we need to make a brief excursion into it.

An excellent guide to the scope of European demographic change is an AEI paper published by Nicholas Eberstadt last November. It notes that Europe's population is the world's oldest, and in little more than a decade its median age will begin creeping towards 50. The continent's birthrate is well below replacement. In fact, it is the lowest birthrate ever recorded for a major geographical area. Other studies show that Europe's population is going to start shrinking extremely rapidly by 2015. And as social science statistics go, demographic projections, at least over the short and medium term, tend to be quite accurate. So Europe faces a choice: either allowing massive immigration--and some estimates are that the necessary levels will be around 50 to 100 million over the coming decades. Or … permitting the economy to go massively out of whack, through both unfunded welfare mandates and skyrocketing labor costs. A lot of people up until about 5 years ago held out hope that Europe's immigration needs could be met through the new member states of Eastern Europe. But in 2002, a book by the German economist Meinhardt Miegel called *The Deformed Society* showed that the former East Bloc's birthrates were in most cases even lower than Western Europe's. Any significant migration from the Eastern European countries would cause a brain drain that would badly damage even the healthiest Eastern economies.

Now, Europeans are not, for the most part, panicking over this. A Eurobarometer poll showed recently that 56 percent of Europeans recognize the need for immigrant labor, while 80 percent favor more stringent border controls. That sounds self-contradictory, but maybe it's not. Europeans, it seems, are neither so naïve as to think they can maintain the ethnic and cultural make-up of their countries, nor so politically correct as to admit any reprobate who shows up at the gates of Europe. Their problem is they're having trouble figuring out where the gates of Europe *are*.

Islam

What worries them is Islam. Americans often snicker at Europeans for having allowed so many Muslims to immigrate over the last three decades. But such snickering is misplaced. I'm reminded of an article Midge Decter wrote a few years ago about the young crowds of Catholic youths who would gather in public squares whenever the late Pope showed up, shouting, *We want God! We want God!* This was true of immigrants, too, and she said, "Who even knew–or what is more to the point, who even cared--whether they were Catholic or not?"

That *is* more to the point. I have never heard any American comment in a negative way on the overwhelming Catholicism of our Latin American immigrants. This is somewhat surprising. After all, there *are* organized forces in this society–such as feminists–whose interests clash with those of believing Catholics, if they stop to think about it. But no one ever *did* stop to think about it. And Europe behaved as we did. When they began admitting guest workers from North Africa and Turkey in the 1960s, and 1960s, Islamic radicalism was not on anyone's list of worries. No one considered that these people had a religion at all.

The fact that Europeans have a much, much more serious immigration-and-assimilation problem than Americans is largely an accident. But it has been made worse by a failure to assert European culture and values. That failure, again, comes from an inability to define what European identity is. At the end of his book on Clausewitz, Aron wrote, "Europeans would like to exit from history, from la grande histoire, from the history that is written in letters of blood. Others, by their hundreds of millions, wish to enter it." This is the central issue when we think about the immigration to Europe. The big question may be not whether these immigrants convert from Islam to secularism (nobody is seriously suggesting that they will convert to Christianity). The question is whether, in coming to Europe, they believe they are immigrating towards, or away from, history, *la grande histoire*, and whether, once they're present in Europe, they feel a nostalgia for history or are content to live without it. It's an open question. The French unease with the veil has always reminded me of the American unease with

graffiti in the 1970s--it is not such a serious problem in itself, but it is a sign that those who used to be considered the public authorities have lost control of the public space, and thus are authorities no more.

The scope of immigration is something Aron did not live to measure against his theses on the enduring nature of nationalism. It is, again, hard to say what he would have thought of it. Aron frequently compared Communism to a *religion de salut*, or religion of salvation, and when he did, the specific religion to which he referred was Islam. He is not the only Frenchman to have done this: Jules Monnerot, a Caribbean intellectual who started his life as a hard-line communist and ended it as a member of the National Front, wrote a strange but very interesting study of the linkages back in the 1940s in a book called the *Sociology of Communism*. Jean-Paul Sartre, when he attacked Aron for his anti-Communism, often said that he had no right to criticize the Communist movement because he was not in it–which is a religious, not a political attitude. However he addressed this issue, it is probable that Aron would have considered the issues raised by Islam in Europe inseparable from the issues raised by Islam abroad. One thing he understood in the immediate aftermath of World War II, and that Sartre did not, is that French domestic unity was peculiarly dependent on international developments. (The same is true of the EU today.) At the end of the War, the resistance (around which any French government would have to be built) was divided between Communists who sympathized with the Soviet Union and others who had fought alongside, or at least sympathized with, the Americans. As Aron remembered it, "What I was always explaining at the time, to Sartre for example, was that there is such a connection between international relations and the domestic politics of France that, in the case of tensions between the two great powers, the unity of the French Resistance would not survive it."

Aron and the Iraq war

This allows me to address briefly, before I close, my second question, which is whether Europeans remain basically as sympathetic to American foreign-policy aims as Aron was. And here is something that ought to give us pause. Among Aron's students were a couple dozen of the most prominent philosophers and political scientists in France. Most of these self-identified Aronians were against the Iraq war, and some of them vehemently so. Why is this?

No one can say how Aron would have reacted to September 11. He was no fair-weather friend of the Atlantic alliance, but there are a couple of principles in Aronian thought that might have made him skeptical that the road to victory in the war on terror led through the democratization of Iraq. One is his distrust of utopias, and his phenomenological insistence on actual behaviors. When he looked at the actual behavior of the Muslim world, he found it big, immovable and unchanging. Writing about the early twentieth century, Aron said, "The Arab states resembled the Muslim states of the past, created by force of arms, superimposed on multiple tribes, without any equivalent of the European middle classes, made up of bourgeois, bureaucrats or intellectuals capable of running a constitutional state." The description is not particularly out of date.

For a tough-minded person, Aron had a real horror of war, because he had a particularly vivid conception of its unintended consequences. Some of these were moral. He opposed the Algerian war, writing at the time: "The French pacification must be understood as including torture, true; but the war of liberation must be understood as including terrorism. When you have torture in the interest of an Algérie française against terrorism in the interest of Algerian independence, it is the ends that decide it, not the means." Aron said that if France had wanted to stay in Algeria with 400,000 men, it could have done so. But it could never have carried off a total victory.

On a larger scale, Aron early on developed out of World War I a theory of "guerres en chaîne," or chain-reaction wars, which he made the subject of one of his most enduring books. The difficult-to-break cycle of chain-reaction wars, comes about for a couple of reasons. First, people tend to fight present, nearby enemies with the aid of future, distant enemies, and can unwittingly strengthen the hand of their opponents in the next war. This happened with Russia in World War II, and--as it turned out–with Islamists in the Cold War. Second, under modern conditions. the ideological claims of war tend to grow to match the carnage that modern war brings with it. World War I was not meant to be a revolutionary war, Aron wrote, but "starting in 1917, when they launched the rhetoric of 'liberation of the nationalities,' the statesmen of the Entente gave their enterprise a revolutionary character." Both dangers are present in Iraq, even if the revolutions the invasion gave rise to are ones we look upon favorably, such as Lebanon's.

But I would add that it is just as easy to find skepticism in Aron about the kind of human-rights based thinking that provided the European alternative to the Iraq war. Aron was sympathetic to human rights, to the aspiration that Europe could recover its greatness by, as he put it, "adapting itself to the spirit of the new times, and [could] help cure other civilizations of the childhood diseases of modernity." But while he had a deep respect for human rights as rights, he was inclined to think that human rights as politics were Baby Boomer stuff–a substitute ideology for socialism that was not very rigorously thought out. He called it "a search for something that was neither acceptance of the government, nor revolution, nor terrorism. It was a way for the generation of 1968 to feel they were being true to themselves while doing something completely different."

Beneath the flux of wars, Aron detected a larger trend. In a great lecture delivered in London 45 years ago, called "The Dawn of Universal History" he said: "For the first time, the so-called superior societies are starting to live an identical history." That is, they are beginning to run along the ruts that technological efficiency dictates. It was the 19th-century ideologues of industrial society, of rationalization and progress–particularly Karl Marx and Auguste Comte–who provided Aron with his most useful analytical tools. They got a great deal right. But, Aron complained, "They underestimated the persistence of history's traditional side, the rise and fall of empires, the rivalry of regimes, the disastrous or beneficent exploits of great men."

There are two powers in the twentieth century, Aron thinks, that wreaked havoc by--as a matter of ideology–taking the insights of the industrial age and put them to the service of primitive barbarism: Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. Like al-Qaeda today, they assumed technology brought only quantitative changes. They wanted to pursue an archaic, tribal kind of power politics, but with modern implements. Here Aron's thinking anticipates that of Robert Cooper, the adviser to Tony Blair who is one of the EU's most sophisticated foreign policy thinkers. Out of WWI, Aron insisted, Europe drew the lesson that war doesn't pay. But there was a hitch. Paradoxically, the more people draw this lesson, in fact, the more war does pay

for those willing to pursue it.

With the death of the Pope this week, there has been a great deal of talk about the German phenomenologist Max Scheler, on whom Karol Wojtyla, before he became Pope, wrote his dissertation. Aron, who wrote widely on German thought, was also a big fan of Scheler, and I'd like to leave you with something he wrote about him in 1951: "It could be," Aron wrote, "according to a theory of Scheler, that all the different philosophies are available to every generation, and 'material factors' open or close the locks that permit them to penetrate into the real." This view is at the heart of Aron's work. It may make him frustrating to some, Europeans as well as Americans, since it doesn't permit us to see any philosophy as permanently the best, or free us from second thoughts about the path we've chosen. But it also means that good philosophies are always there to be chosen, which ought to be as much a consolation to our generation as it was to his.

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