

Topic Page: [Aron, Raymond, 1905–1983](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/aron_raymond_1905_1983)

Definition: **Aron, Raymond** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

French sociologist and political commentator. Never afraid to follow an independent view, however unfashionable, he stressed the importance of the political element in social change. He saw industrial societies as characterized by pluralism and by a diversity of values and he was highly critical of Marxism.

Aron was professor of sociology at the University of Paris 1955–68 (resigning during the 1968 riots) and was a highly influential commentator on politics through his articles in the newspaper *Le Figaro*.

Summary Article: **Aron, Raymond**

From *Encyclopedia of Modern Political Thought*

Raymond Aron (1905–83) was a distinguished French philosopher, political thinker, social scientist, and journalist. He wrote influential columns for *Le Figaro* (1947–77) and *L'Express* (1978–83) and played a major role in shaping moderate and conservative opinion in France in the years after World War II. Today, he is widely acknowledged to be one of the most prominent twentieth-century representatives of the French tradition of political liberalism. He was profoundly shaped by his experience of witnessing the rise of National Socialism in Germany as a student in that country in the early 1930s. As he put it in his 1970 inaugural address at the Collège de France, the experience of a civilized country descending into barbarism permanently cured him of “facile progressivism,” the illusion that “history automatically obeys the dictates of reason.”

It was during this period that Aron discovered the sociological and historical reflection of the German sociologist Max Weber, whose thought he admired and did so much to introduce into French intellectual circles. But the mature Aron expressed grave doubts about the excessive pathos and Nietzschean nihilism that he came to see just beneath the surface of Weber's austere methodological reflections. Aron increasingly turned to an array of thinkers—the political Aristotle, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Charles-Louis Montesquieu among them, who provided a firmer foundation for his own choice of political moderation over fanaticism in its various forms. In a series of writings culminating in *The Opium of the Intellectuals* ([1957] 2001), Aron criticized the indulgence of progressive intellectuals toward totalitarian regimes and ideologies and dissected the myths of the left, revolution, and the proletariat, respectively. Despite a well-deserved reputation for thoughtful and balanced political analysis (Aron always insisted that the principal virtue of the social scientist was equity, not neutrality), he won the unrelenting enmity of Jean-Paul Sartre, who never tired of dismissing him as an “anti-communist dog.” For many French intellectuals in the decades after World War II, it was “better to be wrong with Sartre than right with Aron,” to cite a saying that widely circulated at that time.

Aron was a remarkably prolific writer and scholar. The author of at least forty-five books and of dozens of others that appeared posthumously, he wrote about modern political regimes and industrial societies in a manner that affirmed the essential autonomy of politics, theorized about international relations (he was a harsh critic of the realist-idealist dichotomy so central to contemporary international relations theory), and wrote influential interpretations of such classic political and philosophical thinkers as Niccolò Machiavelli, Karl Marx, and Tocqueville. His masterworks such as *Paix et guerre entre les nations* (1962) and *Penser la guerre, Clausewitz* (1976) explored the intersection of political

philosophy and international relations. They combined encyclopedic learning and moderate and humane judgment with what Aron's friend and contemporary Bertrand de Jouvenel called "the sadness of the political thinker." For Aron, there was no end of history in sight. The best hope was to cultivate moderation and to bring violence under salutary political control. Aron was a tough-minded moderate, a conservative-minded liberal, who at the end of his life worried that liberal societies had forgotten that free men were citizens with duties and not merely individuals with rights. For his admirers, such as the French political theorist Pierre Manent, he was that rarity, an orator and civic educator "who spoke with authority and competence and eloquence about the public thing" (2010.) He remains an important intellectual, political, and scholarly reference point in France and in many countries around the world, including the former communist countries of east-central Europe.

See *also* Liberalism

Further Readings

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Daniel J. Mahoney

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