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In and out of neoliberalism: Reconsidering the sociology of Raymond Aron

Abstract

This article reconsiders the work of Raymond Aron in order to explore the fracture lines that existed (and in many ways continue to exist) between conservative forms of political liberalism, as advocated by Aron, and neoliberal ideas of economic or market freedom associated with Hayek and his followers. These tensions between Aron and Hayek are analysed by assessing Aron's involvement in the Mont Pèlerin Society and the Congress for Cultural Freedom through the 1950s, and then considering the arguments of his 1962 review of Hayek's *Constitution of Liberty* and his 1963 Jefferson Lectures. While Aron has been largely neglected in the existing literature on neoliberalism, it will be argued that he was the key sociological figure to engage critically with neoliberalism in its formative years and, beyond this, that the value of his work today lies in its defence of the social basis of democracy and freedom against the raw economism of neoliberal thought.

Keywords

Aron, freedom, Hayek, industrial society, liberalism, Marxism, neoliberalism

There is currently a tendency within sociological theory to treat neoliberalism as an all-encompassing hegemonic project: one that asserts the overarching powers of the market over all aspects of social and cultural life, a development which is said not only to be without organised opposition from the political Left (which is often said to be drawn increasingly onto neoliberal ground; see, for example, Dardot and Laval, 2014: 1–18) but to be largely free from internal disputes and divisions. This article takes issue with the latter part of such an argument by examining the role that Raymond Aron played in contesting the neoliberal project from its inside in its formative years. Rather than treating neoliberalism as a unified 'thought collective', one associated, in the first instance, with the membership of the Mont Pèlerin Society (as argued by Plehwe, 2009: 4), it will be argued that the picture is far more complex than this, not least because sociologists such as Aron who were members of this Society openly sought to distance themselves from the ideas of key neoliberal figures such as Friedrich Hayek. This article will centre on the work of Aron in order to explore the

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fracture lines that existed (and perhaps continue to exist) between conservative forms of political liberalism, as advocated by Aron, and neoliberal ideas of economic or market freedom associated with Hayek and his followers. These tensions between Aron and Hayek will be examined by looking in detail at Aron's involvement in the Mont Pèlerin Society and the Congress for Cultural Freedom through the 1950s, and then considering the arguments of his 1962 review of Hayek's *Constitution of Liberty* and his 1963 Jefferson Lectures. While Aron has been largely neglected in the existing literature on neoliberalism, it will be argued that he was the key sociological figure to engage critically with neoliberalism in its formative years and, beyond this, that the value of his work today lies in its defence of historical and comparative sociological analysis against the underlying economism of Hayekian thought.

Sociology and neoliberalism: From Paris to Mont Pèlerin

This article will start with two landmark events in the history of neoliberalism at which there was a strong but little-known sociological presence. The first is the Walter Lippmann Colloquium. This event was held in Paris from 26 to 30 August 1938 to celebrate the publication of the French translation of *The Good Society* (in French *La Cité Libre*), a work that had originally been published by Lippmann (1938), a prominent American journalist, the year before (for a detailed pre-history of the Colloquium, see Burgin, 2012: 67–72; for its proceedings and a detailed commentary, see Audier, 2012a). This Colloquium was organised by Louis Rougier (a philosopher of science who was, in the words of Foucault (2008), 'one of the rare and very good post-war French epistemologists'; p. 161) and involved 26 main participants that included, among others, Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek (leading Austrian economists who were well versed in classical sociology; see Gane, 2014), Wilhelm Röpke and Alexander Rüstow (key figures in the post-War development of German ordoliberalism; see Foucault, 2008: 75–158), Jacques Rueff (a leading French economist who later became an advisor to de Gaulle) and three prominent sociologists: Raymond Aron, Alfred Schutz and Michael Polanyi. The event ran across 4 days and was organised around the following main themes: whether the decline of liberalism was due to 'endogenous causes'; liberalism and the economy of war; liberalism and economic nationalism; liberalism and the 'social question'; psychological and sociological causes for the decline of liberalism; and whether liberalism itself needed to be reinvented (for running order of these sessions, see Audier, 2012a: 411–495).

Lippmann, in his opening 'allocution' at this event, advanced the following position: that laissez-faire or 'old' liberalism had been unable to serve as a guide to human conduct and that rather than repeat doctrines from the nineteenth century it was now necessary to take part in an 'extensive revision' of such ideas and in so doing play a role 'in a decisive struggle for the defence of civilization' (Lippmann in Audier, 2012a: 427, translation mine). Unsurprisingly, this view proved to be divisive, and through the course of the Colloquium, two main groups emerged: first, those who argued that there was nothing 'to criticise or change in traditional

liberalism as it was and as it is' (this was mainly the position of von Mises), and second, those that saw the reasons for the decline of liberalism as lying in liberalism itself and who argued as a consequence that a 'fundamental renewal' of the liberal project was needed (Rüstow in Audier, 2012a: 478–479; translation mine). The ordoliberalists (Röpke and Rüstow) positioned themselves in the latter camp, and argued that it was necessary to move beyond a stark choice between a society that is accepting of 'free price formation' and another 'organised on a basis other than competition' (Rüstow in Audier, 2012a: 488). Lippmann, for his part, largely sided with them and argued in the penultimate session of the Colloquium that the next step was to develop a new liberalism that was not simply economic in basis, but which took account of the role of the state in determining the legal framework that made free economic activity possible. There was little, if any, agreement over the details of this agenda, and even the name that should be given to this new liberalism proved contentious (various terms such as 'positive' liberalism were discussed and in turn dismissed), but, nonetheless, the Colloquium was important as it placed a number of core liberal thinkers from different national settings into contact with one another and put the idea of a new or neoliberal project firmly on the agenda.

The practical outcomes of the Colloquium, however, were limited. The main development was the founding of a centre for the study of the renewal of liberalism (formally titled 'Comité international d'étude pour le renouveau du libéralisme' or CIRL), a project that was led by Louis Rougier and the economist Louis Marlio and which involved other key figures from the Colloquium such as Hayek and Röpke (for an overview of the formation and activities of this organisation, see Audier, 2012b: 157–164). The Centre was inaugurated in March 1939, but its activities soon halted following the outbreak of war in September that year – an event that split its French members politically (see Denord, 2009: 51) and scattered many of the original participants of the Colloquium geographically (von Mises, for example, moved to New York). The momentum of the new liberal movement was temporarily lost, and for this reason Jamie Peck (2008: 30) argues that neoliberalism, as a coherent body of ideas and practices on the ground, had 'a false start at the Colloque Walter Lippmann' and only received a 'kick start' following a second event: the founding of the Mont Pèlerin Society by Hayek in 1947.

The history of the Mont Pèlerin Society – *the* transnational think-tank that brought different strands of Austrian, German, British, French and American neoliberal thought into contact with one another – has now been well documented (see Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009). But one aspect has, to date, been neglected: the inclusion of key sociological figures in the early years of its membership. Indeed, this is one of the main lines of continuity between the Lippmann Colloquium and the Mont Pèlerin Society as Aron, Schutz and Michael Polanyi were all present at the former and were also involved in the early activities of the latter. This points to an input of sociological ideas into the early life of neoliberalism, even if, as will be argued below, these ideas ultimately proved to be incompatible with the neoliberal doctrines advanced by key figures

such as Friedrich Hayek. This article will address these tensions by focussing on the work of Raymond Aron – arguably the most prominent sociologist to be involved in the early formulation of the neoliberal project and to break publicly with this project once it became defined by an overriding commitment to economic, or to be more precise, market-centred freedoms.

Beauvallon and beyond

An obvious place to start in considering Aron's position within the neoliberal movement is his participation in the Colloquium and the Mont Pèlerin Society. This, however, is more difficult than might be thought, for while Aron, along with Polanyi and Schutz, attended the Walter Lippmann Colloquium (indeed, Foucault (2008) notes that Aron was the 'general secretary' of this event; p. 132), neither Aron nor Schutz made any recorded contribution, and Polanyi spoke only once; on the fourth day of the Colloquium in a session on the psychological, sociological, political and ideological causes for the decline of liberalism (see Audier, 2012a: 472–475). That Aron did not speak at the Colloquium is perhaps not surprising as he was still at an early stage of his career and had at that time only published an early book on German sociology and two theses on philosophy and history. But even if Aron was a junior member of the Colloquium, at least when compared to figures such as Mises and Hayek, he was a prodigious talent and would have been recognised as such by Rougier. Aron had come first in the *agégation* at the École Normale Supérieure in 1928 (the same year in which Jean-Paul Sartre failed this exam; see Aron, 1990: 25), where his faculty advisor was Célestin Bouglé (who, with Emile Durkheim, had co-founded *L'Année Sociologique* in 1896). He spent his early teaching years in Cologne and then Berlin (see Aron 1997: 24), and as a result had detailed knowledge of German social theory (see Aron, 1957a: 131). More important within the context of the Colloquium, however, were Aron's political commitments. He claims to have been a socialist before the War, or more precisely until he studied political economy (Aron, 1997: 37), but even in the early years of his career he was hostile to many of the ideas of Marx (see Aron, 1990: 41) and sought to rid himself of 'the superstition that Sartre defended to his dying day: "the right are all bastards" ...' (Aron, 1990: 55). If Aron was a socialist, it involved a commitment to a socialism of a weak kind. While he maintained an interest in Keynesian economics throughout his career (see, for example, 1957a: x), which he thought closer to reality than classical political economy (see 1961a: 18), relations between Aron and most figures on the political Left were fractious, in particular with Sartre, whom Aron (1990) later labelled a 'nasty kid' who never 'diagnosed Soviet totalitarianism, the cancer of the century, and ... never condemned it as such' (p. 330). Aron, in turn, was castigated by the Left for refusing to support the student protests of May 1968, which he dismissed as little more as a 'psychodrama'. Aron's (1969) critique of these events, alongside his argument that the trade union movement is the 'fundamental conservative force' in advanced industrial societies (p. 27), led Sartre to attack Aron publicly in an article in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, through the course of which he accused Aron

of repeating ‘to his students ideas from his thesis, written before 1939’, adding that ‘while those listening to him have no opportunity to exercise any critical control over him, he is exercising a real power, but one that is certainly not based on scholarship worthy of that name’ (Sartre cited in Aron, 1990: 327). For these reasons, among others, Aron has often been dismissed as a sociological apologist for the Right (see Audier, 2012a: 241), although as Peter Baehr (2013) has warned, ‘we should avoid caricature’ (pp. 107–108) as Aron never aligned himself with the new Right and refused to be a neoliberal in the Hayekian mould.

In the 1930s, Aron was part of a powerful group of liberal thinkers in France that included fellow participants of the Walter Lippmann Colloquium such as Louis Baudin, an economist at the Sorbonne who later became a member of the Mont Pèlerin Society, and Etienne Mantoux, who wrote a stinging critique of Keynes’ position on the Treaty of Versailles that was lauded by figures such as William Rappard (a founder member of the Society) and Jacob Viner (a key figure in the emergence of Chicago School economics). While Louis Rougier was the organiser of the Walter Lippmann Colloquium, it would be a mistake, as Serge Audier (2012b: 146) has observed, to assume that he assembled a group of French thinkers that were united by an agreed set of sociological or ideological commitments, for this was not the case. Rather, this group was, in practice, far more ‘nébuleuse’. Nonetheless, Audier groups Aron together with two other members of the Colloquium – Robert Marjolin (an economist who became an advisor to de Gaulle through the Second World War) and Roger Auboin (an economist who specialised in questions of international cooperation in monetary policy) – whose liberal ideas were very much shaped by the threat and experience of war. Marjolin, in particular, proved to be an important contact. In his *Memoirs*, Aron (1990) recalls,

During my first stay in London [1940], I again met Robert Marjolin ... Through him, I met the liberal economists of the Reform Club, Lionel Robbins (now Lord Robbins), Friedrich von Hayek, and others, with whom I had dinner almost every Thursday during the war.

(p. 116)

At a later point in this same text, Aron (1990) adds, ‘During these years I lived in French circles, but I also entered into English society. The Reform Club and the liberal group – Lionel Robbins, Friedrich Hayek – welcomed me with a generosity that I remember with gratitude’ (p. 133). Oddly, given that Aron was in close contact with Hayek through the War, there is no other mention of him in his *Memoirs*, and he gives no indication of what, exactly, was discussed at these dinners and in meetings at the Reform Club. This, however, is not the only biographical detail that is missing from Aron’s *Memoirs*: there is no mention of the Walter Lippmann Colloquium (although this seems to be a common pattern among its attendees; see Audier, 2012b: 156) or of figures such as Rougier, Mises, Röpke, Baudin or Mantoux whom he would have met in person in Paris and whose work, presumably, he would have known well. There is also no

mention of the Mont Pèlerin Society, which he later joined – presumably at the invitation of Hayek. It appears that in later life Aron purposively sought to expunge these connections from his biography. The question this begs is, ‘why?’

The records of the Mont Pèlerin Society list Aron as a new member in 1949, and 2 years later he delivered his only formal presentation to the Society at its annual meeting in Beauvallon, France. This presentation was part of a session on ‘The Source of Pro-Soviet Bias Outside Russia’, which also included speeches by Carlo Antoni, an Italian philosopher based at the University of Rome, and Rebecca West, a British novelist and journalist famed, among other things, for covering the Nuremberg Trials for the *New Yorker*. Aron opened his speech by drawing a distinction between the ‘reds’ and the ‘pinks’ – between militants who were part of the Leftist establishment in France and those who held more moderate socialist beliefs and, while broadly sympathetic to the Marxist cause, denounced certain aspects of the Soviet regime. The main target of Aron’s critique was the ‘reds’ and, in particular, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, who, he claims, knew of the horrors of Stalinism and yet refused to take a stand against communism. He argues that the reason for this is that they believed in the unconditional defence of just causes, regardless of the consequences, and could not confront the reality of state violence in the Soviet Union because they believed devoutly in three related myths: the revolt and triumph of the people, anti-capitalism, and confidence in progress and history.

Aron analyses each of these beliefs in turn before arguing, in response, that there is a tendency for the Left to blame everything on capitalism, and to denounce inequality as something that is intrinsically part of capitalism while placing messianic hope in the belief that it will disappear under conditions of communism. Aron here derides the intellectual and political practice of the Marxist Left by asking who is in the position to reveal the ‘rational’ or ‘scientific’ principles of history and of the communist alternative. His answer is that it is a privileged elite that charge themselves with the responsibility for teaching the masses what the society of the future will look like. He argues that such an arrangement, performed in the name of ‘revolutionary rationalism’, can lead, at best, to enlightened despotism and, at worst, to the tyranny of a greedy minority that have a range of modern techniques of power at their disposal. For these reasons, Aron concludes his speech at Beauvallon by arguing that three lessons must be learned from the tragedy of Stalinism. First, a sociological lesson: that a heavily regulated economy tied to a system of collective property is not necessarily emancipatory in basis but instead can give rise to new means of oppression. Second, a political lesson: that a party that claims absolute power under the pretext of transforming the social order will end up creating a system that will rule through the despotism of the minority. And finally, a philosophical lesson: that it is an illusion that all we need is a heroic act from a few people in order to topple the normal ways of human society. Aron (1961b) here advances the following dictum: ‘Revolutions are sometimes inevitable but are almost always a tragedy [*un malheur*]’ (p. 10, translation mine).

Many of these ideas are developed at greater length by Aron in his *Opium of the Intellectuals*, published 4 years later in 1955. This work questions the political ‘myths’ – ‘the left’, ‘the revolution’, ‘the proletariat’, ‘progress’, ‘necessity’ – that are central to Marxist thought and asks whether ‘planned’ economies (see Aron, 1957b: 22) or ‘socialist societies’ (Aron, 1957b: 237) bring an end to inequality or instead simply reproduce the structural inequalities of capitalism, albeit in a different form. Aron (1957b) takes the latter view and argues that in such societies, ‘just as under capitalism, the “boss class” lays down the law. Soviet managers retain for themselves the equivalent of capitalist profits. Incentives, wages and production bonuses resemble the practices of Western capitalism of yesterday’ (p. 237). Aron returns to this question of the inequalities of Soviet society repeatedly in his writings of the late-1950s and 1960s. In *Progress and Disillusion*, for example, he declares that ‘inequality of income is not always greater in a Western society than in societies of the Soviet type’ (1968: 186; for a more detailed discussion of Soviet stratification, see 1968: 16–20). In *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, however, Aron’s (1957b) main concern is why the Left refused to see the inequalities that had been produced by communism and instead believed, unbendingly, in the ‘infallibility of the Party’ (pp. 106–114). Aron’s explanation is that Marxism had taken on the form of a religion that intellectuals on the Left refused to see either through or past. He writes,

The Marxist prophetism ... conforms to the typical pattern of the Judeo-Christian prophetism. Every prophetism condemns what is and sketches an outline of what should or will be; it chooses an individual or a group to cleave a path across the no-man’s land which separates an unworthy present from the radiant future. The classless society which will bring social progress without political revolution is comparable to the dreams of the millennium. The misery of the proletariat proves its vocation and the Communist Party becomes the Church ...

(Aron, 1957b: 267)

Aron responds by arguing that it is necessary not only to question the millenarian basis of revolutionary politics, but also to think sociologically about the kinship that existed between Western capitalism and Soviet-style communism. For Aron, this is only possible if these two systems are treated as different forms of industrial society that are united in their quest to develop ‘productive forces’. Aron (1967) distanced himself from the French Left by arguing that there was no evidence to support what some Marxists called ‘the pauperization of the proletariat’ (p. 21) as in fact the reverse was true: the growth of capitalist economies post-1945 ‘benefitted all classes’. And against the assumption that communist society was necessarily egalitarian in basis he insists that all industrial societies, including those of the ‘Soviet type’, operate through a combination of ‘hierarchy and competition’, for competition is inevitable in all societies ‘where social position is not conferred by heredity’ (Aron, 1968: 43).

There were, then, structural similarities between different types of industrial society, be these capitalist or communist in political organisation, that neither the Left nor the Right were prepared to confront.

Aron contra Hayek

While Aron's fractious relationship to the political Left was in keeping with many of his colleagues in the Mont Pèlerin Society, his position in relation to the Right, and to the core members of the neoliberal project, is more complex. For while Aron was clearly hostile to the politics of the French Left and also an early member of Mont Pèlerin Society, it would be a mistake, as Audier (2012b: 146) has observed, to characterise Aron as a 'neoliberal of the right' and as an 'alter-ego' of Hayek. Ties between Aron and Hayek were not strong, perhaps explaining why the latter barely appears in Aron's *Memoirs*. Aside from his single presentation to the Mont Pèlerin Society, Aron sat mainly in the margins of the Society and, with Michael Polanyi, devoted his energies instead to a different organisation: the Congress for Cultural Freedom. While the Congress and the Mont Pèlerin Society initially had some degree of overlap (see Audier 2012b: 315–317), in practice they were quite different organisations. The founding conference of the Congress in Berlin in 1950 was attended by figures such as Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, Karl Jaspers and Benedetto Croce, and in later years the Congress attracted a strong contingent from the British Left (see Wilford, 2003: 193–224) that included high profile figures such as Hugh Gaitskell (leader of the opposition from 1955 to 1963) and Anthony Crosland, the author of the influential tract *The Future of Socialism*. Prominent sociologists were also involved, particularly in the American branch of the Congress, which counted Daniel Bell, Edward Shils and David Riesman among its ranks. Aron sat on the executive committee of the Congress in its early years and published articles on 'Asia: Between Malthus and Marx', 'Nations and Ideologies' and 'The Fifth Republic' in its associated journal, *Encounter*. When it later emerged, however, that the Congress was part-financed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Aron distanced himself from the organisation and stated that he had been deceived by Michael Josselson, an Estonian who founded the Congress. He reflects in his *Memoirs* that while at the time he had thought 'that the Congress was funded by American foundations', there were many signs that should have alerted them to the real source of its money. Even so, in later life Aron (1990) remained unrepentant about his participation in this organisation, stating that he was not paid by the Congress and that it gave him 'the opportunity to defend and illustrate ideas which, at the time, needed defenders' (p. 174).

Aron and Michael Polanyi were members of the committee that organised the 1955 Congress conference, which was held in Milan under the title 'The Future of Freedom'. The line-up of speakers at this event was impressive and included leading intellectuals from across the social and political sciences including Hannah Arendt, Kenneth Galbraith, and Hayek, who had previously contributed to discussions at the Congress event on 'Science and Freedom' that had been organised by Michael Polanyi in Hamburg in 1953 (see Congress for Cultural

Freedom, 1955). There is no formal record of what was said at the Milan conference, but two sketches of this event were published in back-to-back issues of *Encounter* in late-1955: one by Edward Shils and the other by a close friend of C. Wright Mills, Dwight MacDonald. MacDonald's is the livelier and more entertaining of the two accounts. He recalls that several rows of seats at the conference were reserved for citizens of Milan. In the event very few attended, but among those that did was the Chief of Police, 'who put everyone at their ease by ... lighting up a cigarette under a large VIETATO FUMARE sign' (MacDonald, 1955: 70). His overall assessment of the conference, however, is damning. For despite the odd highlight (including a clash between Daniel Bell and George Kennan over the human value of American culture), he declares that the conference was 'complete failure as a medium for the exchange of ideas' (MacDonald, 1955: 73), not least because it failed to delimit what was meant by the term freedom, over which 'agreement was general, vague, and tepid' (MacDonald, 1955: 74).

Shils (2006), in turn, dismissed MacDonald's account as characteristically 'flippant and light-headed' (p. 96) and offered a more sober overview of proceedings at this event. He draws particular attention to one of the opening sessions in which Aron declared that

The once unequivocal distinction between 'right' and 'left' had been damaged by the knowledge that combinations once alleged by extremist doctrines to be impossible – combinations like collective ownership and tyranny, progressive social policies and full employment under capitalisation, large-scale governmental controls with public liberties – are actually possible. The full awareness that nationalisation is no universal solution to economic problems and that British socialism has not resulted in tyranny have materially weakened the ideologies of thorough-going socialism and thorough-going neo-liberalism.

(Shils, 1955: 53)

This important statement by Aron is clearly far removed from the work both of Mises and Hayek, who framed the differences between state planning and free market capitalism strictly in either/or terms. Aron argues, by way of response, that there is more to the 'Left' than simply an ambition for centralised control of the economy through 'planning'. In *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, he develops this position further by considering a range of leftist ideologies that are to lesser or greater extent 'authoritarian', 'liberal' or 'egalitarian' in basis (see Aron 1957b: 32), and arguing that between these different positions are often practical points of reconciliation and compromise with forms of economic liberalism. For this reason, Aron insists that there is no necessary dichotomy between a market economy, on one hand, and 'total planning on the other', for, in practice, these are 'rival models' that 'no existing economy actually reproduces'. Indeed, he declares that 'Mixed systems are not monsters incapable of surviving, or transitional forms on the way to the pure type: they are the normal thing' (Aron,

1957b: 311). For Aron, the only way forward was to recognise this fact and to move beyond the ‘fanaticism’ of both of sides of this debate (pro-Soviet and neoliberal) by developing a sociology and politics that were no longer steeped in ideology.

In Milan, Aron was not alone in questioning the dichotomy between state planning and market capitalism that had been central to key neoliberal tracts such as Hayek’s (1944) *Road to Serfdom*. Bertrand de Jouvenel – a journalist, political philosopher and founder member of the Mont Pèlerin Society whom Aron knew well (they attended the same lycée and later met through an association of the League of Nations in Geneva; see Aron, 1990: 33, 105) – gave a provocative speech on the ‘fundamental similarities’ between Soviet and capitalist economic systems. The centre-piece of this speech was a section on ‘Stalinist super-capitalism’, in which de Jouvenel (1956) argued that ‘the economic regime of the Soviet Union, being a regime of very rapid accumulation, bears a greater likeness to the Marxist model of Capitalism than does the Capitalism of the unionised Western democracies’ (p. 64). Unsurprisingly, Jouvenel’s views ‘enraged’ many of his fellow Mont Pèlerin Society members, in particular Mises, Hayek and Röpke (see Audier, 2012b: 317) who refused to see any structural similarities between Soviet and Western capitalist societies. But among Congress members in Milan, both Jouvenel and Aron and found a more sympathetic audience that was intent on asking whether the Soviet economic system, ‘by virtue of being a large-scale industrial system’, in fact ‘had to confront the same problems as a market economy in making decisions as to the types and quantities of goods to be produced, the allocation of resources, etc.?’ (Shils, 1955: 54). Aron and Jouvenel agreed that this was the case, and on this point they clearly departed from Hayek (1948: 79), for whom there were only two choices: central planning or market-based planning through competition. The distance between Aron and Hayek on this question is notable, for Aron treated the idea of central planning as nothing more than an ideal-typical or perhaps even ideological ‘myth’, one that had unnecessarily preoccupied leftist advocates of Soviet society as well as their neoliberal critics.

What was Hayek’s response to this line of attack? Unfortunately, there is no record of his contribution to this event as he does not feature in Shils’ and MacDonald’s accounts, or in *The Soviet Economy* – the collection of papers produced out of the Milan conference (see Aron et al., 1956). One thing we do know is that one of the main disagreements at this event was between Hayek, who, on one hand, insisted on the spontaneity of the social order and the rule of law, and Hugh Gaitskell, who argued for the democratic participation of employees in the life of enterprise. Audier (2012b) describes the general mood of the conference as one that was more favourable to the latter position and to ‘passing from a dogmatic opposition between socialism and capitalism’ to ‘a compromise in favour of the mixed economy’ (p. 317; translation mine). This clearly placed Hayek in a difficult position. Audier surmises that Aron, in situating communism and liberalism in the same category of industrial societies called for an end to doctrinaire socialism *and* liberalism, and in taking this

position publicly criticised and marginalised Hayek, who had spoken the day before. Relations between Aron and Hayek soured from this point onwards, but Michael Polanyi, who most likely invited Hayek to this event (see Scott-Smith, 2002: 451), remained on good terms with him and the pair continued to correspond after this event. On 9 November 1955, Polanyi wrote to Hayek to apologise for the conduct of the chairman of this event and the ‘clumsiness of Sidney Hook’, which had led to part of Hayek’s opening statement to be lost (Polanyi, 1955). On 20 November, Hayek (1955) replied to Polanyi that the conference had been ‘heavily weighted’ on the ‘Labour side’ and that while he had wanted to defend his point of view he became ‘increasingly discouraged and finally felt it was of no use’. Despite this, Hayek still hoped to have the opportunity to respond to Aron’s accusation that there was an ‘inverted Marxism’ that was inherent in his position, one, presumably, that gave sovereignty to the market rather than to the state. He added that he had never wanted the Mont Pèlerin Society to be ‘homogeneous in the sense that all members should agree’ and that if Polanyi, Aron and Jouvanel were to leave the Society, he would ‘probably rapidly lose interest in the proceedings and get tired of the thing’ (Hayek, 1955).

In the event, Aron did resign his membership of the Mont Pèlerin Society that year, presumably because of the disagreements with Hayek and others that had surfaced at Milan. However, he remained active in the Congress for Cultural Freedom in the immediate years that followed, and in 1960 organised an event at Basel–Rheinfelden, the materials from which were published in abridged form in 1963 under the title *World Technology and Human Destiny*. In his opening ‘report’ at this event, entitled, ‘Industrial Society and the Political Dialogues of the West’, Aron (1963) framed the task in hand in the following way:

Private property versus public ownership, anarchy of the market versus planned economy, capitalist exploitation versus equality ... have lost a great deal of their force. Whether the issue is the status of property, planning, or the equalization of income, henceforth it is not so much a question of choosing between two alternatives than of combining two complementary, methods, of deciding how far one should go in a given direction.

(p. 6)

This statement, which is in keeping with the views expressed by Aron in his writings from the mid- to late-1950s, is underpinned by a theory of industrial society developed from the work of Saint-Simon and Comte (see Aron, 1967: 15–17). For Hayek and von Mises, Saint-Simon and Comte were sociologists of the worst type as their methodological and political commitments to collectivism were authoritarian and perhaps even totalitarian in basis (see Hayek, 1952; Von Mises, 2007; Gane, 2014). But for Aron (1967), the importance of these thinkers lies in their theory of industrial society, which in distinction to that of Marx ‘attached little value to differences in political systems because it refused to give importance to the form of ownership’ (p. 17). This meant that it was possible to

analyse different variants of industrial society (be it capitalist or communist in political form) by focussing on their underlying modes of social organisation and, in particular, institutions such as the family, the state and culture (see Aron, 1967: 15). This meant, to the disdain of figures such as Hayek and Mises who both defended private property as a first principle, comparable structural features of capitalist and communist societies (e.g. the presence of class inequalities in both) could potentially be identified and analysed without first of all subsuming them to the values of a particular type of political regime.

For Aron, the work of Comte is particularly important in this regard as it is said to transcend a crude opposition between capitalism and socialism, and with this any ideological commitment either to class struggle or the nationalisation of industrial production (see Aron, 1963: 7). What Comte offers instead is a definition of industrial society that is not defined by industry itself but rather by a number of other 'essential features', namely, 'freedom of work for the individual', the determination of hierarchy and values by the 'functional organization of work and society' and the transformation of work by the 'systematic application of science to the organization of production' (Aron, 1963: 59). But this is as far as Aron follows Comte, for he argues that there is a degree of economic determinism in his positivism that mirrors that of Marx. He writes, 'Both Comte and Marx used to say that, given a certain type of economy, a certain type of society, politics, and way of thought will follow'. Aron (1963) responds by taking a different position: 'I say exactly the contrary: given a certain type of economic organization, the possibility remains open for various political regimes, various beliefs, various religions, and in the most profound sense of the term, various human communities' (p. 72). Aron's point is, again, that the social should not be reduced to the play of economic or political forces and that if some degree of separation between these two is maintained, then it becomes possible to analyse the structural dynamics of different types of industrial society without situating them within a false dichotomy between 'planned' socialism and free market capitalism. For it is precisely the intersection of concerns between the institutional dynamics of the social and the spheres of politics and economics that forms the 'proper subject of the sociologist' (Aron, 1961a: 21) – a disciplinary affiliation that Aron applies to himself (see Aron, 1961a: 23).

Hayek's *Constitution of Liberty*

Through the course of the 1960 conference at Basel–Rheinfelden, Aron (1963) publicly distanced himself from Hayek, and in particular from his opinion that 'any interference by the state is the beginning of enslavement', by stating bluntly in reply that 'We have no example of totalitarianism evolving out of dirigisme in a democratic country' (p. 81). The differences between Aron and Hayek, however, did not stop there. In his opening report at this conference, Aron (1963) spoke of a 'doctrinal conflict' over the concept and question of liberty (p. 9). While Aron does not cite Hayek by name, this is a thinly veiled reference to Hayek's (1960) *Constitution of Liberty*, which was published in 1960 – the same

year as the Basel–Rheinfelden conference. In 1962, Aron (1994) wrote a detailed review of this classic neoliberal text that returns to the core question of the Walter Lippmann Colloquium: ‘what a free society, that is, a good society, ought to be’ (p. 73). It is instructive to consider the main arguments of this review as they reveal many key points of difference between Aron and Hayek that otherwise lie concealed.

Aron’s first step in this review is to take issue with the concept of liberty that lies at the heart of Hayek’s position. He observes that Hayek defines liberty in negative terms as the absence of constraint, but argues that this idea of constraint lacks clarity for it treats coercion in ‘more and less’ terms: if people ‘escape from constraint, they are free; or better, reduction of constraint gives the measure of their liberty’ (Aron, 1994: 74). Aron problematises this definition by citing the example of a soldier who is constrained in their daily actions but nonetheless consents as they have not necessarily enrolled in the army under conditions of force. In light of this example, he argues that Hayek, in defining liberty in terms of individual decisions, neglects the underlying structural, political and democratic contexts within which such decisions are made. This leads Aron (1994) to make an important sociological point:

Life in society implies the coordination of individual activities. In turn, this coordination requires rules, that is, the distinction between what is authorised and what is forbidden. It also requires a hierarchy of authority in no-matter-what collective enterprise, economic or military.

(p. 75)

Hayek, for Aron, fails to see the fundamentally *social* basis of liberty, and in so doing neglects the necessary relationship between freedom and authority in all industrial societies, again regardless of their political organisation. Hayek, instead, insists on the rule of law, which is supposed to apply equally both to those who govern *and* those who are governed. Such law is to be general and therefore should not constrain any particular individual interests. But Aron takes issue with this position, observing that a law that is general in theory may nonetheless be felt to be ‘oppressive’ and potentially discriminatory by those to which, in practice, it applies. In answer to Hayek’s proposition that ‘a law ought to be as acceptable to those it strikes as to those it does not concern’, Aron (1994) cites the example of progressive taxation as a general law that is unable to escape the charge either of bias or coercion by the parties involved: the rich ‘will complain of discrimination’ or the poor ‘will take umbrage at privileges’ (p. 80). The conclusion Aron (1994) draws from this case is that Hayek’s ideal of general law cannot hold, for ‘there is no objective criterion of non-discrimination and non-privilege (no more than there is an objective, external definition of constraint)’ (p. 81).

From this broadly philosophical starting point, Aron moves to a consideration of the ‘socio-economic’ aspects of Hayek’s text. He initially agrees with the basic tenet of Hayek’s liberalism, namely that ‘the goal of a free society ought

to be to limit as much as possible the government of men by men and to increase the government of men by laws' (Aron, 1994: 82). But Aron adds another level of complexity by arguing, against any theory of pure bureaucracy, that it is 'men' rather than laws *per se* that guarantee the exercise of justice. Drawing on Locke, he observes that this is the case, in particular, for the foreign affairs of nation-states – in the drawing up of international treaties and in matters of war and peace to which few laws apply (this perhaps explains Aron's early interest in Lippmann, who had been part of the team that drafted Woodrow Wilson's 'Fourteen Points' at the close of the First World War; see Steel, 1999: 128–140). Aron's (1994) position, in response to Hayek, is that federative power never proceeds purely on the basis of general law, and in turn he broadens this into a more general point:

All power includes some element of the government of men by men; liberty is not adequately defined by sole reference to the rule of law: the manner in which those who hold this power are chosen, as well as the way in which they exercise it, are *felt*, in our day as integral parts of liberty.

(p. 85; emphasis mine)

Aron (1994), then, is concerned not only with structural conditions of democracy but also with questions of 'feeling' or what he calls 'the problem of interior liberty' (p. 85). One of the problems of Hayek's approach, and also that of fellow Walter Colloquium and Mont Pèlerin Society member Jacques Rueff, he argues, is that their distinction between liberty and coercion is based upon a primarily *economic* model of subjectivity, within which the individual is either free to choose goals and means or becomes simply an instrument of 'planners'. Rueff polarises these two ideal-types of economic action into two forms of political governance – liberal versus authoritarian or individualistic versus communist – but Aron (1994) observes that Hayek's approach is more subtle as it moves towards the former of these two binaries through 'the intermediary of the generality of the laws': laws which forbid certain types of individual conduct but at the same time 'leave a margin of choice' and 'do not encroach upon the sphere of individual decision' (p. 88). Aron, however, nonetheless objects to this idea of freedom as he argues that even the most impersonal of rules can produce the 'sentiment' of oppression. And he adds a further point of criticism: while Hayek's *Constitution of Liberty* seeks to protect and enlarge the sphere of private freedom by reducing state intervention and appealing to the rule of law (two things that are not necessarily compatible), liberty is never simply a private concern. Indeed, Aron (1994) writes that

Men sacrifice a part of their private sphere in order to be governed by brothers of their race, language or religion, in order to be treated as equals, in order to have a fatherland, even in hope of escaping misery and poverty.

(p. 89)

In light of this, liberty need not be economic in the first instance, as it can be social or political in basis and thus collective rather than private or individualistic in form, a position that again is far removed from the neoliberal philosophy of market-freedoms advanced by Hayek.

Aron extends many of these arguments in the Jefferson Lectures he delivered at Berkeley in 1963, which were published subsequently in English in 1970 under the title *An Essay on Freedom*. Aron (1970) opens these lectures by reconsidering the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, the value of which is said to lie in its treatment of democracy as a condition of society rather than as a form of government (pp. 9–10) and, more fundamentally, in its refusal to follow leftist approaches, from Saint-Simon through to Marx, that are said to share a tendency to subordinate politics to economics (Aron, 1970: 19). Aron (1970) initially returns to these ideas from de Tocqueville in order to counter what he calls the ‘nightmare’ of Marxism (p. 50), but through the course of these lectures he extends them, in the opposite direction, into a critique of the core arguments of Hayek’s *Constitution of Liberty*. Aron presents Hayek as a ‘non-conformist’ who pushes a ‘liberal-individualist’ or ‘Whig’ critique of socialism to an extreme by prioritising the freedom of the individual from political forms of coercion. Aron is partly sympathetic towards Hayek’s project but, at the same time, argues that freedom is not simply individual in basis as there are many positive freedoms made possible, under certain conditions, by collective entities such as the nation and the state. Aron (1970) explains,

The formation of an independent nation eventually becomes for a population, even one that is theoretically an integral part of the liberal state, the necessary condition for the personal freedoms in a twofold sense. The individual will not feel free even if, according to the legislation in force, he ought to experience the feeling of freedom, as long as discrimination between the ethnic group to which he belongs and the dominant group persists *in practice*. Nor will he be able to arrive at the positive freedom of political participation as long as he does not recognise as his own the state of which he is theoretically a citizen. If freedom as participation is, in our time, an integral part of freedom as we conceive of it, national liberation is an indispensable element or phase of this freedom.

(pp. 60–61)

Aron argues that Hayek’s neoliberalism pushes the argument for individual freedom too far and abandons any concern for political freedoms that transcend the economic freedoms of ideal-typical figures such as the ‘consumer’ or the ‘entrepreneur’. In response, Aron emphasises important connections between personal freedom and nationhood and also the key role the state has in tackling questions of inequalities of different kinds. Here, he speaks strongly in support of the social state while at the same time drawing the line at government policies that seek to achieve a far-reaching distribution of income. He writes that ‘The state can and should assure to all, through social legislation, the minimum of

resources needed to have a decent life at the level tolerated by the collective wealth' (Aron, 1970: 93) and adds that if socialism does have a place then it lies in supporting this cause.

There are three further problems with Hayek's position that Aron addresses in turn through the course of these lectures. First, he argues that, factually, it is not correct to insist on the fundamental incompatibility between planned and market-based economies for in practice 'capitalist economies have absorbed a sufficient dose of intervention and government ownership so that socialism is seen as part of reality rather than a transcendent project which could be carried out only by means of a violent revolution ...' (Aron, 1970: 53). In response to Hayek, Aron (1970) takes a strong position on this point: not only are capitalist economies what he calls 'mixed regimes' but also there is no direct line from a partially planned economy, which he sees as the normal state of things, through to a totally planned economy and an accompanying totalitarian state. This, he writes, is an 'obviously false idea' (p. 83). Second, in line with his review of *The Constitution of Liberty*, he argues that Hayek's negative definition of freedom from coercion is far too restrictive as its resulting emphasis on individual economic freedoms does nothing to capture the freedoms of most members of contemporary capitalist society: from the worker on a production line to employees of a 'vast organization' through to the Jesuit 'who has taken a vow of obedience' (Aron, 1970: 89). Again, what is missing, for Aron, is a consideration of collective social and political forms that offer the promise of positive freedoms of different types. And third, Aron argues that Hayek's answer to this problem is to assert the rule of law as the basic means for ensuring freedom in practice. Aron is torn on this point, for, on one hand, he agrees that the rule of law is central to the operation of Western liberalism, but, on the other, treats it as an ideal rather than as a fact, and argues that it is a mistake to see it as something that is 'fully accessible to all' or 'coextensive with the whole existence of society'. In a key passage, Aron (1970) states,

Whether we like it or not, the governments of societies will always be characterised by the power of some men over others; in time of crisis, when threatened by other collectivities, rulers make decisions which involve all the citizens and inevitably make these citizens their instruments.

(p. 90)

He adds that the same can be said of the modern business world, which, for the most part, is not about the creative freedoms of entrepreneurs but the emergence of large organisations in which the freedoms of the majority of workers are quite limited. For these reasons, Aron (1970) argues that Hayek's emphasis on the rule of law, and its accompanying commitment to the protection of private freedoms 'confuses one aspect of freedom with the whole of freedom' (p. 91) and is, on its own, not nearly enough.

Conclusion

The divisions between Aron and Hayek can be best described in terms of a split between, on one hand, a social and political conservatism that sought to protect the practical workings of liberal democracy and to some extent the welfare state and, on the other, a thoroughgoing neoliberalism that was founded on a fundamental belief in the liberatory powers of the market. In 1960, this division between conservatism and neoliberalism was cemented by Hayek (1960), who in his postscript to *The Constitution of Liberty* (entitled ‘Why I am not a Conservative’; pp. 343–356) argued that the problem of conservatism was that it was a reactionary rather than an agenda-setting movement, and for this reason, unlike neoliberalism, it was destined to operate on grounds that were not of its own making. The sociological ideas that had been present at the outset of Mont Pèlerin Society – many of which had questioned the logic and rationale of Hayek’s economic liberalism – had by this time largely disappeared, and with the estrangement of figures such as Aron the Society began to address a far narrower set of economic concerns (particularly under the guidance of Milton Friedman; see Burgin, 2012: 123–151). It was at this point that the neoliberal ‘thought collective’, as described by Mirowski and Plehwe (2009), began to take shape – a history that has now been well documented. The fate of the sociology that was cast out of the neoliberal project through the 1950s is, however, less clear, and this leaves the question of what might be gained by revisiting this sociology, and in particular Aron’s critique of Hayek’s neoliberalism, today.

This is not an easy question to answer in part because Aron refused to align himself with any particular school of social or political theory, with the consequence that, unlike Hayek, he had few followers. This appears to have been an intentional strategy of Aron’s (1997) intellectual practice: ‘in adopting certain positions, I have been a man very much alone in the face of history and in the face of intellectual styles’ (pp. 253–254). Following Aron’s death in 1983, one of his former students, Stanley Hoffman (1983), expanded on this point, observing that

Throughout his life, Aron had shocked the French by taking unfashionable stands, by flouting the conventional distinction between left and right, not because he liked to be provocative ... but because of his passion against myths and prejudices, his need for intellectual lucidity, and his attachment to liberal values.

Aron did indeed distance himself from the major political ideologies of both the Left and the Right through the post-War period, but it is important to note that his critique of ideological and utopian thinking was directed primarily at the Marxist intelligentsia rather than towards the ideologies of the new Right. This led Shils (1985) to describe Aron as ‘the most severe, and the most learned critic of Marxism and of the socialist – or more precisely Communist – order of society ...’ (p. 3). It was this critical and, at the time, largely unfashionable relation to Marxism that initially placed Aron in the same circles as Hayek and other

members of the Mont Pèlerin Society. Indeed, Aron's (1996) *Opium of the Intellectuals* was an attack on the 'myths' of the Left and a commentary on the likely collapse of Marxism as the 'last great ideology'; nowhere, even in late works such as *In Defence of Decadent Europe* (pp. 3–75), did he subject neoliberalism, with its new utopia of the market, to such sustained critique.

But this did not mean that Aron was comfortable in the company of Hayek as they were clearly divided over how liberalism should respond to Soviet-style communism: Aron opposing all forms of political tyranny by re-asserting core liberal-democratic principles; Hayek offering an economic solution that largely dismissed the value of democracy itself (see Fischer, 2009: 326–369). Aron, for his part, was not opposed to the play of free market forces (see 1997: 201), but argued that societies, or liberty for that matter, should not simply be understood or judged according to abstract economic principles such as 'competition' (see 1961b: 93) or 'a rate of growth' (see 1997: 266). For this reason, he declared that the authority to address issues ultimately should not lie in the field of economics: 'I am suspicious of the ruses of reason as much as I am the virtuosity of economists' (1994: 90). Some have characterised Aron, as a consequence, as a political thinker (see, for example, Anderson, 1997), but such a characterisation misses the fact that Aron's differences with Hayek and with neoliberalism more generally were not simply political; they were also sociological. For whereas Hayek had little time for the social – that 'weasel word' (see Hayek, 1991) – and forcefully disassociated his own position from classical sociologists such as Auguste Comte (see Gane, 2014), Aron came back time and again to the social basis of liberalism, and drew extensively on the work of Comte and Saint-Simon to develop a framework for analysing the societal basis of different forms of industrialism. Aron did this because he was concerned not simply with the economic motivations of individual actors or with the dynamics and logic of the market, but with the operation of a range of different social institutions, many of which, he argued, can take a socialistic form even within capitalist society (see 1957b: 309). At the heart of Aron's critique of neoliberalism, then, lies a defence both of the social as a realm that cannot simply be reduced to politics or economics and of sociology as the discipline that can produce comparative understandings of the societal dynamics of different forms of political and economic organisation. Aron's conservative political commitments aside, this defence of the social and of sociology divided him from Hayek and continues to be a valuable undertaking in a world in which economic categories and explanations increasingly hold sway.

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