

Towards a Comprehensive Theory of International Relations: The New French School of Sociological Liberalism

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Perhaps, at the end of this essay, we will be able to take again the sense of the concept of theory that we rejected, namely that which combines theory and philosophy. Not because we haven't found in any way in conclusion that we had resolved to look at the starting point, namely the contemplative truth, which essence is superior to scientific knowledge. However, the entire process, from imagining the interstate system as a social system to the analysis of sociological patterns and historical singularities in decision making, constitutes the critical or interrogative equivalent of a philosophy.

(Aron 1967: 860)

Abstract

Aron's work initially gained more recognition in the United States, where influential figures such as Morgenthau, Kissinger, and Young engaged with his ideas, although his work is not based on a strict separation of International Relations with the other fields of Human Sciences. Aron's interdisciplinary foundation, encompassing philosophy, political science, sociology, and history, laid the groundwork for his unique approach, allowing to understand conflicts between policies as intertwined with other social processes (inside and outside the polity). His renowned work *Peace and War* transcended diplomatic actions, delving into interstate relations, value conflicts, mutual perceptions, and political power's essence, encapsulating an ontology of international relations. Regrettably, Aron's research, developed within the Center for European Sociology, is often oversimplified or misconstrued. Aron's sociological approach also diverged from French and English IR schools. Inspired by Weber, Marx, and French thinkers, he emphasized cultural context, individual action, and conflict's role in history. Despite subsequent literature, Aron's work and approach to IR have unfortunately been marginalized. This study aims to revive Aron's contributions, investigating their applicability in contemporary international relations. Aron's multidisciplinary tradition offers an alternative to mainstream IR theories, providing a more nuanced perspective on evolving global politics. By placing Aron's vision within a broader social sciences context, this paper advocates for a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach to IR, reinvigorating his sociological liberalism for modern challenges.

Keywords: theory, International Relations, French school, sociological liberalism

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Resumen

El trabajo de Aron inicialmente ganó más reconocimiento en los Estados Unidos, donde figuras influyentes como Morgenthau, Kissinger y Young se involucraron con sus ideas, aunque su trabajo no se basa en una separación estricta de las Relaciones Internacionales de los otros campos de las Ciencias Humanas. El fundamento interdisciplinario de Aron, que abarca la filosofía, la ciencia política, la sociología y la historia, sentó las bases para su enfoque único, permitiendo comprender los conflictos entre políticas entrelazados con otros procesos sociales (dentro y fuera de la entidad política). Su obra renombrada *Paz y Guerra* trascendió las acciones diplomáticas, adentrándose en las relaciones entre Estados, los conflictos de valores, las percepciones mutuas y la esencia del poder político, encapsulando una ontología de las relaciones internacionales. Lamentablemente, la investigación de Aron, desarrollada en el Centro de Sociología Europea, a menudo es simplificada o malinterpretada. El enfoque sociológico de Aron también se apartó de las escuelas francesas e inglesas de Relaciones Internacionales. Inspirado por Weber, Marx y pensadores franceses, enfatizó el contexto cultural, la acción individual y el papel del conflicto en la historia. A pesar de la literatura posterior, la obra de Aron y su enfoque de las RI han sido lamentablemente marginados. Este estudio tiene como objetivo revivir las contribuciones de Aron, investigando su aplicabilidad en las relaciones internacionales contemporáneas. La tradición multidisciplinaria de Aron ofrece una alternativa a las teorías convencionales de las RI, proporcionando una perspectiva más matizada de la política global en evolución. Al situar la visión de Aron en un contexto más amplio de las ciencias sociales, este artículo aboga por un enfoque interdisciplinario integral de las RI, revitalizando su liberalismo sociológico para los desafíos modernos.

Palabras clave: teoría, Relaciones Internacionales, escuela francesa, liberalismo sociológico

Introduction : Why Read Raymond Aron today ?

In his enlightening essay *Why Read the Classics*, Charles Tilly argues that the classics are classics because they “identify distinctive, crucial, durable queries concerning social processes” (Tilly 2003: 5). Despite Aron’s controversial political activism, Tilly asserts that his work should be considered a classic, and he should be considered a founding father of International Relations (IR). He approached fundamental problems in a novel and inventive way, exploring new avenues of research through the incorporation of his multidisciplinary theoretical framework.

During the dominant period of neo-realism, Raymond fought the overly parsimonious structuralist approach to IR, arguing the need to redefine the definition of rationality to incorporate the cultural lens in which these actors view the world and their interests. Before the establishment of the constructivist theoretical school of IR,

Raymond Aron was championing its main axioms in France. The goal of this paper is to reintroduce his theoretical framework to a broader audience and to incite further research—applying his methodology—to our increasingly complex and interconnected world. We also aim to present his historical sociology of international relations, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the diverse histories, cultures, and political philosophies that influence the actions and priorities of nations on the global stage. This perspective is particularly relevant as the world experiences significant transformations in power distribution toward non-Western parts of the world.

In addition to examining the core principles and methods of Aron’s approach, this paper will also discuss the broader implications of historical comparative sociology and its integration into contemporary academic research. The interdisciplinary nature of Aron’s work not only fosters collaboration among scholars from different fields but also contributes to the development of new theories and methods of analysis in the study of international relations.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to highlight the enduring significance of Raymond Aron’s work, both as a pioneering figure in the field of international relations and as a source of invaluable insights for understanding the complex and ever-changing global landscape.

The late success of a transatlantic thinker in his own country

Aron’s writing did not instantly become a classic in France. His work in the field of international relations initially received a warmer welcome on the other side of the Atlantic. His ideas have been cited or commented on by influential internationalists such as Hans Morgenthau, Morton Kaplan, Hedley Bull, Henry Kissinger, Robert Tucker, Oran Young, Kenneth Waltz and the Franco-American, Stanley Hoffmann, who contributed to the diffusion of Aron’s work (Hoffmann 1965; 1983).³ Frequently invited to American universities during the 50s, he went to the University of Chicago, Harvard or Princeton, where he became professor at large in 1963,⁴ being in close correspondence with many “founding fathers” of IR theory.

In fact, his very formation was always interdisciplinary. Prior to World War II, Raymond Aron received a doctorate in philosophy, focusing on the nature of history and its role in our understanding of the future course of events and what Weberian sociology changed to our perception of historical becoming. After 1945, he discovered political science and began formulating an interdisciplinary approach—incorporating conceptual

3 As Dario Battistella points out: “An enquiry by APSA, in the 1970s, puts Aron amongst the six most important theoreticians, and *Paix et guerre entre les nations* is considered to be the third most influential work in the discipline, behind *Politics among Nations* by Morgenthau and *System and Process in International Politics* by Morton A. Kaplan, but placed in front of *Twenty Years’ Crisis* by Edward H. Carr, *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area* by Karl Deutsch, *Man, State and War* by Kenneth N. Waltz, and *Strategy of Conflict* by Thomas C. Schelling” (Battistella 2013: 167; see also Lens 1982).

4 See Meszaros & Dabila 2018; see also Dabila 2022.

frameworks derived from the fields of sociology, economy⁵ and history—providing the framework for a new school, which he developed over the course of three years in post-war Germany. For instance, Aron’s most famous work, *Peace and War*, goes far beyond the limits of a treatise of diplomatic action, but encompasses reflections on the nature of interstate relations, conflict, clash of values, the importance of mutual perceptions, and the essence of political power. It is a whole ontology on trans-political interaction, or, *autrement dit*, international relations (see Meszaros & Dabila, 2018).

Unfortunately, the Aronian research program⁶ developed within the research center he created, the Center for European Sociology, is not judged on its own merits, often reduced to a Cold War theory or a naive rightist manifesto (Macleod & O’Meara 2007). Reclaiming the Durkheimian ambition of a total science of man and society, in which the study of politics and international relations would be central, it is however based on a Weberian method of understanding of individual actions. Political behavior is therefore not specific. It is a social action, motivated by a cost-benefits calculus, situated in a cultural context, and defined by goals and values that individuals want to achieve.

In this way, Aron’s sociological approach to international relations differs from the dominant school in France at the time, founded by Marcel Merle, a lawyer and public law professor, influenced by Durkheim’s sociology. However, Merle used an orthodox Durkheimian vision of social life as a basis for analyzing international interactions, in a narrow manner. Based on the inclusion of non-State actors in the analysis of IR, like international organizations and public opinion, Merle’s work focused on the “international society”, a concept in which Aron did not believe. He also diverged from the English liberal school of IR. Yet this other French School of IR initiated by Raymond Aron emerged in parallel to this dominant tradition and clearly predates Marcel Merle’s work (Battistella 2013, Meszaros 2017). It is, epistemologically, a kind of its own. Inspired by Weber’s interpretive sociology, but also the classics of French philosophical thought, like Montesquieu and Tocqueville, Marx’s idea of social conflict as the driving force of history, it also uses Durkheim’s sociology and Mauss’ idea of “vision du monde” and “habitus” as an analytical tool to understand the complex interactions and the conflict of visions inherent to international politics.

Although a substantial amount of literature has been published on Raymond Aron since the 1970s, his work and his theoretical approach to international relations have been progressively marginalized. The majority of these aforementioned works often only served

5 In a Schumpeterian way, i.e. an economy working to theorize human behavior with concept and empathic reasoning, not equations. Schumpeter always defined his method as “economic sociology”, working with “generality, type and model” (See Schumpeter 1983: 47-51). Managing with Sombart and Weber the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften*, he took Weber’s seat at his death.

6 “Centre de Sociologie européenne”, in *Revue française de sociologie*, 1962, vol. 3, n° 3, pp.325-328. The article is not signed but it is indicated at the bottom of the publication that the director is Raymond Aron and the General Secretary Pierre Bourdieu. One can consider that it is a common text.

as a tribute to the author and did not sufficiently underline his conceptual innovations, some of them being very early. Others sought to systematically reformulate his assumptions, corrupting the principal findings of his work. This comprehensive approach, which Aron systematized as historical sociology, is an essential contribution to the field of IR in France and abroad, immediately recognized as such in Europe and United States (Kissinger 1967; Meszaros 2017).⁷ It is a different perspective from the analytical and positivist French tradition of the sociology of international relations, reviving the French classical liberal school of political and social thought (Meszaros 2017). There is a non-negligible utility in utilizing Aron's masterpiece, *Peace and war*, to understand how iterated social interactions influence the length of "the shadow of the future."

What essential elements are required to better decipher today's international relations and which of these elements can be better understood utilizing the multidisciplinary tradition championed by Aron? How should this school of thought be named? To respond to these questions, our work intends to examine the intellectual roots and the originality of this French school of historical sociology and to highlight the efficiency of this approach when applied to contemporary international exchanges. Based on the main elements presented, we will propose a research program whose goal is to promote a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach to IR while elaborating upon the French school of historical sociology.

In his 1935 essay on German sociology, Aron noted that the brilliant but not systematized *œuvre* by Simmel, produced "many admirers and few followers" (Aron 1935; Meszaros & Dabila 2018). In an effort to avoid the same fate, a rehabilitation of Aron's research agenda is required. Based on an expansive interpretation of human history, looking beyond the Westphalian context of state interaction, Aron's vision of IR can be best understood when placed in the context of a wider social sciences research program. This "sociological liberalism" faces numerous challenges to the primacy of existing mainstream IR theories, the discipline could discover precious intellectual resources—imbuing greater explanatory power in the analysis of fast evolving world politics—far beyond the excessively parsimonious realist model of bipolarity and balance of power politics that it has sometimes been reduced to.

The intellectual roots of Raymond Aron's IR sociological theory

In Cologne and in Berlin, where he went on doctoral internship from 1931 to 1933, Aron's exposure to the theoretical framework developed by Weber and his intellectual cohort at the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*—which had not permeated French intellectual thought at the time—imbued a new understanding of social interaction which

⁷ Stanley Hoffmann was sometime referring to Aron as « my master in historical sociology » (Hoffmann 2001: 6).

could be up-scaled to the third level of analysis. In conflict with the Durkheimian school⁸ on many fronts in his *alma mater* of the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris, where Mauss and his fellows were teaching, his new approach to the “*science de l’homme*” was based on interactions between individuals rather than between social groups, emphasizing indetermination and freedom, while condemning social determinism and fatalism. Furthermore, his theoretical framework was not limited to solely importing concepts, but to the conflation of these new influences with the French tradition on liberty and social life. Montesquieu, Tocqueville and Pareto⁹ were introduced to Weber, Simmel and Tönnies, forming a theoretical entourage that placed the individual as the fundamental atom of social life and collective action. Refusing to classify social groups and to give them specifications *per se*, this gathering served as a starting point of Aron’s reflection, which will be a continuing theme in his personal history of sociology, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought* (Aron 1967). Additionally, his book written in 1935 titled *German Sociology*, which combined both the German and French traditions, created an innovative research framework, giving his school a pioneering role, just prior to the massive exile of German sociologists to the United States and Britain after the collapse of the Weimar Republic.

Through this book, Aron was one of the first scholars to translate and introduce the works of German sociologists, notably those of George Simmel, Leopold Von Wiese, Ferdinand Tönnies, Alfred Vierkandt, Franz Oppenheimer, Karl Mannheim and above all Max Weber, to whom he devoted a complete chapter (Aron, 1935; Meszaros & Dabila 2018). He consequently chose not to follow the positivist approach of Saint Simon, Comte and Durkheim. He opted instead to follow in the footsteps of Max Weber, which for him was a more stimulating sociological approach to international relations (Meszaros 2017). As Frederic Ramel noted, Weber was an immediate influence on contemporary IR debate, and it was Aron who introduced it to France.

[Weber’s] thought almost immediately penetrated the field of international relations. It represents one of the sources of realism which was making its mark after the Second World War and constitutes today a necessary place in the increasing importance of the history of the sociology of international relations (Ramel 2006: 63).

Aron was more interested in the competition for power between States and found better tools to study it in Weber’s political sociology. With its agonal (*i.e. conflictual*) dimension, Weber’s sociology places the study of conflict, both intra and interstate, at the center of social action,¹⁰ according to Aron’s own words: “He was not one of these sociologists, such as Durkheim, who believed that the military functions of the State

8 Maintaining cordial albeit distant links before WW1, the war installed a long break-off between the two networks of sociologists, epitomized by Durkheim’s 1915 pamphlet, Germany above all: German mentality and war.

9 Although Italian, Pareto taught in Switzerland and wrote most part of his work in French (Aron 1937).

10 The sociology of Max Weber is a sociology of conflict and domination. *Kampf* (struggle) is for instance one of his “basic sociological terms” (see Weber 1978: 38).

belonged to the past and was fast disappearing [and] believed that conflicts would always remain between the great powers” (Aron 1967a: 562). In his political sociology, the monopoly of legitimate physical violence is in the hands of the State itself (Weber 1959; 1971). At the international level, this monopoly did not exist, which entails that interstate relations are characterized by permanent struggle. Conflict is therefore a constant of social life, not an occasional phenomenon caused by failure and decadence. In international relations, a framework of international laws is insufficient to limit the conflicts which States are prone to; however, notwithstanding the anarchy, which is characteristic of the international system, Weber does not vindicate *Realpolitik* or wilhelminian machiavellism. On the contrary, he criticizes it and considers the *raison d'état* as the only form of objective rationality that can serve to prioritize the government's objectives, which are mainly those of survival (see especially Ramel 2006: 71-76).

The reason why Aron was interested in the Weberian sociology of international relations was due to his own personal experience during World War II. For Aron, man and his thoughts are the product of two separate contexts, intellectual and political one. The first stems from the debate between existentialism and materialism. With his PhD dissertation on the philosophy of history, and his ambition to reformulate a theory of social sciences, he fully entered the academic and ideological debate of his time:

The *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* only represented, in my mind, a chapter, the most formal, of historical knowledge theory. I was hoping, back in these days, to add to this introduction, first a theory of social sciences, and then more concrete theory of historical interpretations – interpretation of eras, civilizations, of the becoming of humanity (Aron 1961: 33).

His writings prior to World War II were a blueprint to remodel human sciences, rebuilding them around a historicized rational actor, an individual choosing the best options for him according to his welfare *and* his cultural yearnings. In Aron's view, human sciences form a system, which is composed of a core theory, a main department of research, and different methods of inquiry. The core hypothesis of this research program combines a vision of *homo oeconomicus*, strongly influenced by Pareto's work and what he calls the *rational actions* of man. But where Pareto saw non-rational actions, based on preferences rather than interest, Weber, and Aron after him, found another type of rationality: the value-oriented rationality, which enables man to gather means toward an end, *i. e.* to act. It is on this philosophy of man and its actions that Aron wanted to build his own epistemological system. He dedicated his dissertation to treating a classic problem: the self-understanding of man and of his historical condition. Reformulated another war, the central question was how can man understand human history as a whole, and conceptualize his place and destination inside it.

This investigation is, by itself, an answer to the existentialist doctrine and to Marxism. As a free and undetermined agent, or a “historical being”, man cannot be seen as a simple agent, “reproducing a universal pattern” (Aron 1938: 53-54). There is no “structure of history” that could enable us, as humans, to understand the meaning and the direction of our history as a species. His remarks were aimed at the Marxist conception of history, particularly the role of perpetual class conflict. It combined the reflections of Weber on the “limits of historical objectivity”—from which Aron derived the subtitle of his PhD dissertation—and the work of Simmel on *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*. Weber condemned any naive researcher, like Leopold Ranke, who was “convinced that knowledge of historical reality must be or should be a copy ‘without presupposition’ of objective facts” (Weber 1904). For Marx, the relational dyad of the Egyptians and their slaves, the Romans and the plebs, the medieval lords and peasant or the bourgeois and the proletarians are simple the embodiment of a universal pattern, defined as class conflict; however, Aron and Weber refuse any design or any universal model of social interaction that would explain every historical situation. According to the hypothesis of a free, rational, and historicized man, this is not only inaccurate, but disables our capacity to understand dissimilar historical situations. It is this hypothesis that Aron appropriates and systematizes to form his own view of history, social sciences, and ultimately International Relations.

Unfortunately, Aron gave up his project of a global epistemology of anthropological knowledge. After World War II and his long stay in London within the heart of the Free French’s government, leading the political and literary review, he had become a man of action, and was more attracted to journalism. He also shortly joined De Gaulle’s new party, the Gathering of French People (or RPF in French). Aron, explains it as a shift of interests after five years as editor in chief of the revue of De Gaulle’s exiled government, *La France libre* (“The Free France”): “The questions of epistemology I was into, that I was even passionate about before 1939, left me cold in 1945” (Aron 1983: 272). But politics were disappointing, even as chief of staff of Malraux at the *Ministère de l’Information*. After his short career as a politician, a columnist and an editor in chief, Aron returned to the university in 1955. There, he resumed his research program. Having spent a significant amount of time on the struggle for power and political analysis, he limited his research to Political Science, International Relations, and contemporary Strategic Studies.¹¹ “Studying politics is studying the actors, and therefore analyzing their decisions, their goals, their means, their mental universe” (Aron 1983:108). Loyal to his intellectual commitments, Aron would be Weberian until his death. This pledge to comprehensive sociology is central to understanding his apprehension to international politics. Trying to understand war and

11 However, his mind was still very curious and in search of new theories and of a new kind of sociology, as his book of history of sociology proves it. Also, his seminar at the Sorbonne gathered very different students, like Raymond Boudon (theory of sociology), Jean Baechler (historical sociology), Pierre Manent (political sociology), Paul Veyne (sociological history of Rome) or Jean-Pierre Derriennic (political sociology) (See Baechler 1983).

interstate relations, he brought with him the German apparatus of historical sociology that was totally neglected in France at that time. His mastering of sociological methods and of philosophical concepts, his vast historical knowledge and this original Weberian positioning contributed to give him a unique place in the French academic landscape.

Aron's thoughts were also influenced by the political context of his day, defined by the second world war and the political difficulties encountered after peace was achieved. These years will further develop his opinions on foreign politics and help him produce a sociology of International Relations—crafted within the context of the “Cold War”—resulting in a sociological approach to bipolarity (Aron, 1963; see also Meszaros & Dabila 2019). The “Cold War”, which he would rather call the “Scorching Peace”, was characterized by the reign and balance of terror, and also a series of major international crises without any possibility of confrontation between the two great powers. This paradox, identified by Aron as soon as 1948, can be summed up into the following formula: “impossible peace, improbable war”. Raymond Aron was soon to write his first essays on international relations, war and strategy, namely *Le Grand Schisme* (1948),¹² *Les Guerres en Chaîne* (1951), *La Coexistence Pacifique, Essai d'Analyse* (1953), *La Société Industrielle et la Guerre* (1959). He also penned numerous papers on “the theory and method of international relations”, written in *Etudes Politiques* and later *Les Sociétés Industrielles* (Aron 1983: 299; 1972 and 2005b). His major work on international relations, *Peace and War*, and also the publication of numerous newspaper articles written during and after the Second World War are considered his crowning achievement.

Peace and war: From the intellectual basis of a comprehensive theory of international relations to the French school of sociological liberalism

According to the Weberian and Clausewitzian tradition, Aron certainly considered international relations and war as sociological objects. For him, society is characterized by the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical violence, whereas international order is characterized by the absence of this monopoly, changing the legality and legitimacy of the resort to armed violence for the different actors (Aron 1967b: 843-845). This distinction is of fundamental importance to the sociology of international relations because it defines the subject of study. The internal order, where the monopolization of violence has led to the suppression of “the war of all against all”, is the concern of political sociology. In the external order the absence of such a monopoly implies permanent conditions of potential conflict between States, thus falling into the realm of the sociology of international relations and strategic studies.

War is therefore necessarily one of the central objects of this sociology. It exists at an international level, as Kenneth Waltz would put it, “because nothing can prevent it” (Waltz

12 More of a partisan book rather than a scientific one.

1959: 188). In the same perspective, Aron, opposed to Durkheim, Mauss or Merle, does not consider it to be a *pathology* of the international system but a *normal* phenomenon (see Meszaros 2017). It is an invariable phenomenon that structures the history of the international system. Even if it does not occur, the efforts of States to prevent it organize the international scene. War, therefore, is undeniably a historical fact and a particular social reality:

International relations are driven by the alternatives of war or peace; [...] this historical phenomenon seems not to be a social phenomenon at first sight or, if I can say, it has the unique character amongst the subjects of sociology to be at the same time both social and asocial. It is sociality because of a certain social relationship between those who fight, but simultaneously it is the very negation of the term social, because those who fight agree upon their enmity and the *breakdown of social relations*. Sorokin puts civil wars and foreign wars in the same category, calling the phenomenon breakdown of social relations. In other words, in this quiet classical perspective, war is more a dissolution of social ties than a social phenomenon itself (Aron 1963: 308).

The sociology of international relations must therefore study this particular social phenomenon: war and more precisely international war. This specific sociology is even more important in the nuclear age (Meszaros & Dabila 2019), when the political calculus for engaging in a conflict have profoundly changed, requiring significant adjustments in the way we study rationality in security studies and the international relations between nuclear and non-nuclear states:

Why am I so interested in military affairs? This started during the last war. I felt ashamed that no French intellectuals had thought about war. And then, there is another reason which seems to be more important, and that is nuclear arms. Using nuclear arms is no longer warfare in the ordinary sense of the word. Nuclear warfare has become a subject of philosophical consideration. When using an arm so as not to deploy it effectively or where the arm becomes the way of avoiding the war, we leave the competence of military specialists and enter that of the political philosopher (Aron 2006: 906)

A philosophical reflection on the nature of war is complementary to a sociology of war and concerns the full spectrum of conflict of the Cold War (guerrilla warfare, war of liberation, conventional wars, nuclear deterrence) and the “concrete study of international relations,” which for Aron, is both historical and sociological (Aron 1967b: 852). To encompass all these aspects of international politics, any theory of international relations must contain the three dimensions of philosophy, sociology and history (Meszaros & Dabila 2018). The theory that Aron puts forward concerns the international system, constituting political units that have regular relations with each other and which are susceptible to being implicated in a general war (Aron 1984: 103). This theory, the aim of which is *praxeological*, puts the accent on three emblematic ideal types of actors of international relations: the diplomat, the soldier and the strategist (in *Peace and War*

Aron only refers to the diplomat and the soldier, but in the rest of his works he shows the importance of the strategist). Through these key actors, it is possible to separate, among general international phenomena, the specific strategic diplomatic relationships between independent political units, to study them.

From an ontological point of view, war is not a relationship between one man and another but a relationship between States (Aron 1984: 113); the international object that Raymond Aron studies is the *interstate system*, which consists of a whole composed of political units (the States) which have “regular diplomatic relations” and which are susceptible to make war one to the other (Aron 1984: II). Aron does not reject the idea of a *transnational society*, such as that described by Marcel Merle, evidenced by “commercial exchanges, migration of people, common beliefs, cross-border organizations and finally ceremonies or competitions open to members of all these units”, but considers that the main amount of violence is by far produced by states (Aron 1984: 113). Therefore, the main driving force of international relations, the one states are trying hard to avoid, is inter-state war.

On the other hand, he does not accept the idea of *world society* or an *international society* that would encompass “the interstate system, the economic system, transnational movements, the different forms of exchange (of “commerce” in the wider 18th-century view) from civil societies to another, supranational institutions (Aron 1984: VIII). In short, such a *society* would include all the aspects of “international life” and would no longer have the characteristics of a society. Using the concept of society implies a coherent totality. Thus, Aron, contrary to Merle, uses the concept of a system “in a non-rigorous way” (Aron 1984: VIII). He does not seek to produce a systemic analysis of international relations, neither to produce an explicative global theory of international phenomena, like Morton A. Kaplan.

For Aron, it is a meaningless task to try and produce a general theory of international relations (Aron 1962; 1967b). Just like Weber, he refuses all causal, deterministic and absolute explanations. His theory is part of a comprehensive logic, that is to say one which allows the understanding or interpretation of international facts. He seeks to establish sociological typologies (a method inspired by Weber and Tocqueville) using principles (in Montesquieu’s sense of the word) rather than determining laws (Aron 1984: 179 et 180). His method aims to understand why an actor behaves in a certain manner and the context in which said action is taken.

Anarchy provides insights into a fundamental problem: why is there a permanent quest for power, security and prestige on the international scene? The behavior of States is the result of the material configuration of these power relationships, expressed in terms of polarity (bipolarity, oligopolarity, multipolarity or polypolarity) and in terms of homogeneity

and heterogeneity according to the degree of legitimacy of the political regimes.¹³ The homogeneous/heterogeneous duo interrogates the distinction of friend or enemy, originally formulated by Carl Schmitt, and gives it a specific meaning (Schmitt 1992).

The concepts of homogeneity and heterogeneity hence invite us to view international relations from an original perspective, focusing specifically on the role of culturally derived ideas and norms in the creation of the lens in which an actor views their environment (Meszaros 2022). The concept of homogeneity and heterogeneity outlined by Papaligouras was used first by Aron and then by Kissinger as an important cultural distinction, leading to the variable of polarity (Aron 1962; 1967b; Kissinger 1957; 1995; Meszaros 2022).¹⁴ In the work of both authors, heterogeneity results mainly from revolution and the formation of what Aron called “ideocracies”. It is “the relatedness or, on the contrary, the hostility of established regimes in the States” which creates the important distinction between homogeneous systems and heterogeneous systems. This distinction results from the idea that “the external behavior of States is not commanded only by the struggle of powers”, goals being also partially determined by the nature of the regime and by ideology (Aron 1983: 452; Hoffmann 1983: 845 and ff). These sociological concepts—“polarity”, “homogeneity”—form the core of Aron’s understandings of world politics.

Consequently, was Aron a liberal, realist, neorealist or something else? This question rests unsettled between the most accomplished French internationalists. Aron’s work was undefinable and Aron himself mistrusted the categorization of schools or trends. During the second debate of the discipline, between Ancients and Moderns, he did not take part in the quarrel between the positivist, systemic approach of Morton Kaplan and the liberal, juridical and historical approach of Hedley Bull. Even if he is intellectually drawn towards the traditional approach of incorporating sociology, history, philosophy and economy, rather than the “modern” approach inspired by the behaviorist revolution, he nevertheless recognizes its value. His liberal conception was also different from the English school. More sociological than strictly juridical and historical, his thought follows Tocqueville, Weber and Clausewitz. From the beginning of his academic career, he understood the importance of exploring the relationship between societies and politics without philosophical prejudice.

I have discovered different people from myself in modern society, for instance Hitler and those who followed him. From this time on, I have, so to speak, been purified once and for all, of that I would call academic idealism. I have had the feeling at one and the same time, that politics is tragic and that one could only have reasonable opinions if one respected, as far as is possible, others and accepted differences of opinion (Aron 2006: 904-905).

¹³ see Papaligouras 1941; Aron 1984: 103; 1983: 302; Meszaros 2007; 2008, 2022.

¹⁴ Kissinger makes a distinction between « revolutionary systems » and (heterogeneous) and « conservatory systems » (homogeneous).

Raymond Aron did not take a normative approach to either science, politics, nor his own intellectual thought processes (see Frost 1997; Hassner 2007, Roche 2021; 2001b; Battistella 2012a; 2012b). But he wasn't a realist in the classic sense of IR theory. Steadfastly anti-totalitarian, he considered that a "sincerely humanistic society" such as inspired by Kant was possible and he shared with Rickert, Dilthey and Weber a "liberal conception of the philosophy of history" (Aron 1981: 315; Canguilhem 1985). His attachment to the freedom of human action was totally incompatible with a teleological and deterministic view of history (Bourricaud 1985; Holeindre 2012). A practitioner of reasonable and moderate thought, which inspired from Aristotle's Middle Way (*in medio stat virtus*), he believed in virtue and prudence in politics, especially in the nuclear age (Meszaros & Dabila 2019). This *via media*—between a realist imperative and a liberal conception—illustrates Aron's desire to overcome the limitations of these two traditional approaches (Châton 2012; Holeindre 2012: 331).

More skeptical than realist, more relativistic than rational, he tested all the hypotheses in order to develop his thoughts, discarding all rigid ideas. His realistic and rationalistic perspectives - his "liberal realism" (Jeangène Vilmer 2013) - led him to consider the State as the central player in international relations. But his skepticism made him avoid considering the national interest in a rigid sense, such as power seeking to be the essence of politics, as is presented by the classical realists since Hans J. Morgenthau (Aron 1967b: 862; Montbrial 1985). His interest in the endogenous factors of political units, his reflections on homo-heterogeneity and the legitimacy of political regimes differentiates his thoughts from those of the neorealist, Kenneth Waltz, whose area of study is the structure of the international system and relations between the units of the system, excluding all the internal factors to the State. In short, Aron's heritage goes beyond the two dominant paradigms of the discipline.¹⁵

Towards a comprehensive theory of International Relations: the new French school of sociological liberalism

In spite of the original nature of his work, Aron did not wish to create either a school or a place of worship (Riesman 1985); however, it happened naturally. He opened a door for researchers who wished to subscribe to this intellectual and multidisciplinary tradition, generally through seminars that incorporated his disciples.¹⁶ Aron's historical sociology of international relations is a fundamental contribution to IR discipline (Friedrichs 2001). Aron has produced a theory of international relations which is original because: it is a mixture of

¹⁵ Even more, with the place given to "ideas and intersubjectivity", Aron's sociology could be envisaged as an "opening" to the constructivism perspective (Holeindre 2012: 330 and 331; for a constructivist approach to the war see Lindemann 2008).

¹⁶ Jean Baechler, in his homage to Aron entitled *Maître & disciple*, shows us the way in which these seminars unfolded, see Baechler 1983. His name has been given to the Center of Sociological and Political Studies Raymond Aron (CESPRA).

philosophy, as a way of forming concepts; sociology, which describes international life with a view to understanding the dynamics; and history, which gives a view in time of the evolution of political forms. Born with the publication in 1962 *Peace and War*, we dubbed his school “French sociological liberalism,” which embodies his theoretical and methodological approach to international relations. It is essential today to develop a research program which would renew this “French sociological liberalism” paradigm.

This conception, unlike the Anglo-American “sociological liberalism”, is not based on the analysis of relations between people and non-State organizations. It does not conceive international relations as transnational relations but studies, in a State-centric perspective, the inner relations of political units, the configuration of polarity in the international system and its homo-heterogeneity based on political regimes. It includes the social relations in the study of IR via its effects on the government. It also conceptualizes war through the lens of a social fact and focuses on specific factors of power, such as nuclear weapons, economic levers, cultural and ideological influence. This Aronian tradition of sociological liberalism articulates three levels of analysis: a philosophical perspective that enables us to create a consistent analytical framework to decipher diverse political phenomenon; a sociological perspective, which allows scholars to analyze historical consistencies between pre and post Westphalian international systems; a historical perspective, which grants greater explanatory power by looking beyond the anomalous nature of a phenomena. By focusing on the narration of actual events, whatever their size, scholars can consider the multiplicity of factors at work in their development (a single battle or election, the life of a party or an individual, the history of a country, of a century, of a civilization or even the world history as a whole (Aron 1963)).

This program is, consequently, multidisciplinary and requires the researchers to be skilled in the three primary disciplines.¹⁷ In order to complete an enriching historical sociology of international relations, it aims to: mix the history of political units over a long period; utilize sociological comparison tools to grasp the nature of social interactions based on social the configuration of the global environment; and, apply a sufficiently rigorous philosophical approach, necessary to adopt the best perspective to deal with the problems implied by the complex nature of international relations. While the post-cold war world experiences chaotic transformations, this method, based inherently on intersubjectivity, is a necessary (albeit less parsimonious) way to understanding the changes in the distribution of power on a global scale. As the West loses its hegemony in world politics, it is essential to recognize the importance of the history, culture and political philosophy of rising non-western nations who interpret actions through a different lens and prioritize policy in a different way than we are accustomed to. It is important to note that European civilization has not always been hegemonic.

¹⁷ On philosophy, sociology and history as the three disciplines of human sciences, see Baechler 2000.

Before the 16th century, Europe has never been the richest or the most powerful region on the planet. It only gained supremacy over India in the 18th century, in China in the middle of the 19th century, and could only take over the Middle East after the collapse of Ottoman Empire in 1918. Even the exportation of the European model of the sovereign state through colonization has been met with mixed results in different parts of the world; especially where intra-state violence has become the overwhelming trend since the end of the 20th century. From the standpoint of historical sociology, which Aron conceived as the only pertinent basis to analyze global history and the daily evolution of international relations, the European hegemony was only recent and momentary. “From now on, historians of Asia are considering as a close era the centuries that have passed from the landing of the first Portuguese ships on the coast of India to the departure of the last English and French troops in Malaysia and Madagascar” he wrote in his insightful essay *Dimensions of the Historical Consciousness* (Aron 1963). His work is sufficiently flexible to be applicable to every form of distribution within the international system and can help us understand the forces that keep one standing while bringing others to decadence, corruption, and collapse.

The theoretical reorganization of the IR discipline, its opening to foreign influences and the fast-growing importance of Anglo-Saxon historical sociology, invites us to reintroduce and update Aron’s theory, while highlighting the original nature of his approach. Today, historical comparative sociology has been integrated into academic research programs. It has its seminal references (Eisenstadt 1985; Tilly 1987; Skocpol 1979; Almond 2011), its manuals (Sasaki 2014; Yengoyan 2006) and its introductory essay (Lachman 2013, Sasaki 2008). It has helped renew several research fields such as world economy, civilizations studies, history of religions, political beliefs and ideologies, and this trend has major implications for IR (Hobden 2001; 2015; Hobson 1997). By expanding our notion of what is historically relevant (the *longue durée* theorized by another famous French academic, Fernand Braudel) we find structural continuity between epochs. Thus, facing a significant sample of trans-political configurations, the IR researcher can more effectively compare a greater deal of cases, and generalize them in paradigmatic or idealtypic situations. For instance, the number of resources a state can make in response to the changing power distribution on the international stage could be expanded using Aron’s system of analysis. Are the two basic reactions limited to *bandwagoning* and *balancing*? (Dabila & Fouillet 2023) Or are their responses better defined through opportunity structures, influenced by the number of units in the game, as proposed by Jean Baechler (Baechler 2003)? The numerous works questioning the “sources of power” (Mann 1986), the nature of state and of its interaction with other States (Lachman 2010, Spruyt 1994; 2005; Spruyt & Cooley 2009), the nature of political violence (Collins 2008, Zimmermann 2012, Kalyvas 2015) and the way ideologies and revolutions change the course of history (Apter 1997; Eisenstadt 2006; Jones 2016, Casey & Dolan, 2023),

war and violent political conflict (Backer, Wilkenfield & Huth 2014; Spruyt 2011; Dabila 2013) could help propel Aron back into the limelight.

Most of all, historical sociology was successful in bringing together sociologists, historians and philosophers to study IR and world political evolution. This is where the collection of Aron's fifty years of writing and teaching material for a systematized sociological history is precious for French academics (Meszaros & Dabila 2018). First, as a leading figure of French political science, his multidisciplinary approach linked together fields of study, which had until then remained segregated. Second, he provided French literature a highly distinctive identity in its analysis of the fields of political, diplomatic, war and peace research. He is also a very respected figure outside of France, where he has helped reintroduce the French perspective to new generations of researchers. In countries as different as Brazil (*Peace and War* was translated in 2002), Spain (Molina Cano 2013), or China, the work of Aron is still very appealing, especially for research communities looking for effective alternatives to the dominant schools within International Relations.¹⁸ Neither naïve to, nor consistently critical of the role of power, this alternative path provided by the "other" French sociological school of international relations is a full-fledged contender to become an influential paradigm in the global IR debate.

Conclusion : a new model of IR to grasp the power shifts of tomorrow

To conclude, the multidisciplinary program proposed by Aron offers a fresh and insightful approach to the study of international relations. It emphasizes the importance of historical sociology, which enables researchers to delve into the complexities of global politics and power dynamics. By drawing upon elements from history, sociology, and philosophy, Aron's approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the ever-changing international landscape.

As the world continues to evolve and non-western nations increase their strength, thus slowly tilting the balance of power, it is crucial to consider the diverse histories, cultures, and political philosophies that shape the actions and priorities of these rising states. Aron's work reminds us that European hegemony has been relatively recent and temporary, and that our understanding of international relations must adapt accordingly.

Furthermore, the growing popularity of historical comparative sociology has led to significant advancements in various research fields, opening up new avenues for investigation and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. The adaptation of Aron's theories and methods in contemporary academic research highlights the enduring

¹⁸ As Li Lan points it perfectly in her thesis dedicated to Aron, Aron's books are being translated in China since 1992, on the proposition of central committee of CCP. Starting with his *Memoirs*, the books started to be translated very fast: *Main Current in Sociological Thought* (2003), *Class Conflict* (2005), *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (2007), *Essay on Liberty* (2007), *Marxisme Imaginaire* (2007) and *Lectures on History* (2011). See Li 2012: 181-183). Aron's master-piece, *Peace and War*, is now available in Chinese since 2013.

relevance of his work and its potential to contribute to the ongoing development of the discipline of international relations.

In a world fraught with uncertainty and shifting power dynamics, Aron's approach offers a valuable alternative perspective to the dominant schools of thought within international relations. By embracing the multidisciplinary and historical foundations of his work, researchers and policymakers can gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex forces that shape our world, ultimately leading to more informed and effective decision-making. ❀

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