

Revolution Is Not a War: Raymond Aron and the Clausewitz Formula

A review of Campi A and De Ligio G (eds.) (2023)
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By Raymond Aron. Venice: Marsilio

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Abstract

This review reconstructs Raymond Aron's 1973 *Collège de France* course on the Theory of Political Action and shows how Aron reinterprets Clausewitz's formula – war as the continuation of politics by other means – against both Marxist and “cynical” realist readings. Engaging Mao's writings on revolutionary and protracted war, Aron insists on a sharp distinction between war and politics: the former concerns coercion and the defeat of an enemy; the latter concerns the conquest and exercise of legitimate power within a community. From this vantage point, he criticizes inversions of the formula (“politics as war by other means”) and disputes Schmitt's concept of absolute enmity, while also distancing himself from realist anthropologies that flatten political action into sheer power. The review situates Aron's project vis-à-vis Lenin, Mao, Schmitt, Morgenthau, and Foucault, arguing that Aron's “heterodox realism” preserves the moral and institutional dimensions of legitimacy without lapsing into naïveté about force. In an age of “hybrid war” and “grey zones,” his clarification of the war–politics boundary remains a powerful antidote to metaphorical militarization of domestic politics.

Abstract (Italiano)

La rassegna ricostruisce il corso di Teoria dell'azione politica tenuto da Raymond Aron al Collège de France (1973) e mostra come Aron rilegga la formula clausewitziana – la guerra come continuazione della politica con altri mezzi – contro le letture marxiste e il “realismo cinico”. Dialogando con gli scritti di Mao sulla guerra rivoluzionaria e di logoramento, Aron insiste sulla netta distinzione tra guerra e politica: la prima riguarda la coercizione e la sconfitta del nemico; la seconda la conquista ed esercizio del potere legittimo all'interno di una comunità. Da qui la critica alle inversioni della formula (“la politica come guerra con altri mezzi”) e al

concetto schmittiano di inimicizia assoluta, insieme alla presa di distanza da antropologie realistiche che riducono l'azione politica a puro potere. Collocando Aron rispetto a Lenin, Mao, Schmitt, Morgenthau e Foucault, la rassegna sostiene che il suo "realismo eterodosso" conserva le dimensioni morali e istituzionali della legittimità senza cadere nell'ingenuità sulla forza. Nell'epoca di "guerre ibride" e "zone grigie", il chiarimento aroniano del confine guerra-politica resta un antidoto alla militarizzazione metaforica della politica interna.

Keywords: *Clausewitz, legitimacy, Mao Zedong, political realism, Raymond Aron, war-politics relationship*

In 1971, Sergio Leone opened *Duck, You Sucker!* – his sixth film – with one of Mao's most famous lines: "A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another." Taken from a 1927 text, that quotation – together with many other forceful sayings of the Chinese Chairman – was collected in the *Little Red Book*, first brandished by the Red Guards. This homage to Mao reflected the seething political climate of the moment. In Vietnam, Latin America, and Africa, guerrilla movements had adopted Maoist teachings on people's war, while in the West the "Great Cultural Revolution" promoted by Mao had become the symbol of a revolution that resisted the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet model. In this context, China seemed indeed "close at hand," and for many the prospect of an imminent socialist revolution no longer appeared remote – one that would not be "a dinner party," but rather "an act of violence by which one class overthrows another."

It was probably the success of Mao's *Little Red Book* that made the so-called "Formula" of the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz even more widely known – namely, that war is "a continuation of politics by other means." In a climate shaped by militant passions, military strategy appeared appealing because it allowed class conflict to be portrayed as a military clash. Interest in the Prussian general,

however, was not new within the Marxist field. An avid student of military history, Engels had undoubtedly read and reflected extensively on *Vom Kriege*, while in his military writings Trotsky explicitly discussed Clausewitz's theories (Sammel, 1981). Mao himself probably did not know Clausewitz's works directly, and the "Formula" may have reached him through Lenin, who in his 1915 pamphlet *Socialism and War* had titled a section precisely with Clausewitz's dictum: "War is the continuation of politics by other means (specifically, violent means)" (Lenin, 1915). By invoking the Formula, Lenin sought to show how the First World War was – not a conflict between "fatherlands" – but a clash between capitalist powers, and how the war thus continued the logic of imperialist exploitation of oppressed nations and the proletariat. Mao, by contrast – engaged in a war of resistance – gave Clausewitz's phrase a rather different interpretation. "War," he wrote in 1936, "is the highest form of struggle for resolving contradictions, when they have developed to a certain stage, between classes, nations, states, or political groups" (Mao, 1936: 20). To conduct military operations adequately it was therefore necessary to grasp their causes and specific features; in the case of revolutionary war, above all, it was essential to recognize whether it is "a revolutionary class war or a national revolutionary war", and that "it has its specific laws of its own" (Mao, 1936: 20). It was also in this sense that – in the celebrated essay *On Protracted War* – he reprised Clausewitz's "Formula" that "War is the continuation of politics." Mao, however, offered a reading different from Lenin's. In this sense, he wrote, "war is politics, and war itself is a political act": "since ancient times there has never been a war that did not bear a political character" (Mao, 1938: 153). Nonetheless, Mao recognized that war and politics remained distinct: "war has its own particular characteristics and in this sense cannot be equated with politics in general," he wrote, restating the Formula: "War is the continuation of politics by other means" (Mao, 1938: 153). "When politics develops to a certain stage beyond which it cannot proceed by the usual means," he further observed, "war breaks out to sweep the obstacles from the way" (Mao, 1938: 153).

As is well known, Aron had been anything but indulgent toward both the rebellious students and, above all, those intellectuals – beginning with his old classmate Jean-Paul Sartre – who had

enthusiastically supported the contestation. In the newspaper articles he published in *Le Figaro* and in *La Révolution introuvable* (Aron, 1968), the impassioned pamphlet written in the immediate aftermath of May '68, he asked why so many of his colleagues had “suddenly forgotten the lesson of all the thinkers they had read and studied.” His harsh polemic against the “May Commune” and its admirers was, moreover, just another episode in the intellectual battle Aron waged against leading figures of French Marxism – a battle begun with *The Opium of the Intellectuals* in the 1950s (Aron, 1955), but in fact traceable in filigree throughout much of his work. Although Aron was thus anything but sympathetic to the positions of the Maoist left, and although he even saw in the enthusiasm stirred by the student revolt a sign of the “end of a civilization” (De Ligio, 2023), he nonetheless recognized in the words of the “Great Helmsman” a fully correct interpretation of Clausewitz’s thought. Moreover, he perceived in those pages – particularly in the thesis that “war has its particular characteristics and in this sense cannot be identified with politics in general” – a clear statement of an idea he himself fully shared. It was probably for this reason that he decided to dedicate the course he taught in 1973 at the Collège de France – published today for the first time in an Italian edition edited by Alessandro Campi and Giulio De Ligio – to the *Theory of Political Action*, developing an argument that led precisely to Mao and his distinction between politics and war (Aron, 2023).

Having arrived at the Collège de France in 1970 at the age of sixty-five, Aron decided to devote several of the courses he taught in the early 1970s to Clausewitz, with a view to writing a study on the Prussian strategist – *Penser la guerre, Clausewitz* – which would in fact be published in two volumes, respectively entitled *L'âge européen* and *L'âge planétaire*, in 1976 (Aron, 1976). Aron’s first, though fleeting, encounter with the works of the Prussian general had already taken place in the 1930s, when as a young scholar he spent an intense research stay in Berlin. There, having come across Schmitt’s *Begriff des Politischen*, he discussed it with Herbert Rosinski, who

strongly urged him to read *Vom Kriege* – a reading that, however, would have to wait more than two decades before becoming, in the mid-1950s, a more thorough engagement (Aron, 1983). After considering Clausewitz's positions in *Peace and War among Nations*, published at the beginning of the 1960s, Aron became convinced that a more mature and structured examination of the German strategist's thought was necessary.

In the early 1970s, Aron devoted three distinct courses to Clausewitz. The first, in 1971-1972, was entitled *Carl von Clausewitz and His Times*; the second, held in 1972-1973, was devoted to the *Theory of Political Action*; and the third, *Games and Stakes of Politics*, was delivered in 1973-1974. In the transcription of the *Theory of Political Action* course, taught in the first months of 1973, several passages make explicit Aron's intent to undertake a comprehensive reinterpretation of Clausewitz's reflections. He was convinced that the general had not had the time to complete the revision of his initial theses in light of a reconsideration of certain aspects which Aron, by contrast, regarded as fundamental, and which were also essential to rescuing *Vom Kriege* from interpretations that had made of it a celebration of war as annihilation.

The structure of Aron's lectures followed a design that was not always linear. What underpinned his discussion was the conviction that Clausewitz's categories could be used not only as a guide for a military praxeology, but also for a "political praxeology." The parallel was justified by the fact that the object of the course – rather than political action in general, or the "nuclear" political action studied at that time by Bertrand de Jouvenel (1963) – was revolutionary action: the action of those forces which, though operating within a single political community, do not act within a framework defined by established rules of the game, but seek to seize power in order to impose new rules. "Politics may entail both an approach that takes into account the direct action of men, and an approach that has as its object the interpretation of norms" (Aron, 2023: 61), he observed, clarifying that the course would address the first variant. As a key of interpretation, Aron also employed that provided by Clausewitz, thus extending the theory of martial action developed by the Prussian general to political action. In revisiting elements of

On War that he had already discussed the previous year, Aron was especially concerned with two points.

The first point had to do precisely with the Formula, which he strongly emphasized was not a militarist doctrine, even though the popularity of Clausewitz's phrase was linked precisely to such an interpretation: "What remains in memory of Clausewitz are the analyses from the beginning, namely the considerations on the relationship between war and politics. It has often happened, however, that these considerations have been distorted, assuming a meaning opposite to the one they actually had. If you recall Pompidou's speech at the centenary of the *École libre de sciences politiques*, he cited Clausewitz not quite accurately, but in the way it is usually cited, namely with the formula 'war is the continuation of politics by other means,' with the implied idea that it is a doctrine. Now, as you know, Clausewitz's is a theory that subordinates military instruments to political will, and is therefore the complete opposite of a militarist doctrine. It is in fact, so to speak, the very first principle of military praxeology, a principle that Clemenceau explained with the formula 'war is too serious a matter to be entrusted to the military,' and which means exactly what Clausewitz intended: the military are the instruments of politicians, without this meaning that civilians should interfere in the conduct of operations" (Aron, 2023: 69).

Alongside this first point was a second, relating to the reconsideration to which Clausewitz, according to Aron, would have subjected the theory originally formulated in his treatise. The general, in fact, would have realized that the attempt to reduce all wars to a single ideal type risked ignoring the fact that, alongside total war aimed at reaching the extreme, there also existed another kind of war, similar to the "lace war" of the eighteenth century, in which the goal was not to disarm and thus completely defeat the adversary. This distinction was relevant for Aron because, when applied to political action, it made it possible to distinguish between different strategies of action, each suited to different contexts.

In his exposition, Aron also contrasted Clausewitz's strategic doctrine with that of Sun Tzu, according to which the primary tool for achieving victory was not the exercise of physical violence, but deception. The Chinese strategist, Aron observed, "always emphasizes the fact that what is essential is to deceive the enemy about what you

are, what you will do, and the intentions you have in mind” (Aron, 2023: 90). While the two praxeologies of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu could be clearly distinguished in military contexts, they could meet within the political praxeology of revolutionary guerrilla warfare, of which the 1960s and 1970s provided numerous examples. It was precisely this convergence that enabled the French intellectual to establish the connection between military praxeology and political praxeology, thereby rendering theoretically legitimate the use of Clausewitz to outline a theory of political action. To establish this connection, however, Aron rejected the idea that it could consist in expanding the meaning of war to include a conflict devoid of physical violence. And it was precisely in this regard that he refused the hypothesis that the Formula could be inverted:

The formula ‘war is the continuation of politics by other means’ is always quoted. One could then simply say: ‘peace is the continuation of politics by other means’ or ‘politics is the continuation of war by other means.’ From a theoretical point of view, however, this derivation poses difficulties, contradicting even Clausewitz’s conceptualization. In fact, if one defines war as a phenomenon characterized by physical violence, one can no longer say that politics is a non-violent war, for that would be a war that is not war (Aron, 2023: 93-94).

Rejecting this path, Aron instead chose the one that passed through the form of military action most explicitly political: the revolution-ary people’s war. In this type of conflict, “the test of will between national entities necessarily becomes both a political and a martial trial, and in any case political in all respects” (Aron, 2023: 95). Although Clausewitz had devoted some attention to guerrilla warfare, Aron believed he had not grasped the novelty that revolutionary war entailed, especially with regard to the extreme level of cruelty it could reach. And precisely in relation to the role assumed by the partisan in contemporary conflicts, Aron directed a first critique at the vision Schmitt had provided of that figure in his essay of a decade earlier: whereas the jurist had portrayed the partisan as one of the “last sentinels of the earth” (Schmitt, 1963), Aron instead argued that he was also characterized by the “promotion of a certain type of regime or

of a certain set of ideas” (Aron, 2023: 118) – that is, he was not only an irregular soldier but also a party militant. Despite such criticisms, however, Aron did not dispute that the figure of the partisan truly represented a reality impossible to overlook. And it was precisely the role that partisan guerrilla warfare – often fueled by ideological motivations – had assumed over the course of the twentieth century that made more problematic the distinction between politics and war which, in his view, was Clausewitz’s most valuable legacy, one to be preserved against all equivocal interpretations.

Commenting on Rousseau’s text *The State of War*, Aron ruled out the possibility that the contradiction between the world within states – subject to rules – and the interstate sphere – subject to an ineffective international law – could be solved by creating an overarching supranational governing institution. By contrast, civil war could inject into the domestic dimension that sense of hostility which usually reigns only among nations. “This confusion of the intrastate and the interstate,” he noted, was precisely “what we have witnessed over the course of the century,” “a permanent intertwining of civil disputes and international ones, with the former colouring the latter with ideology and the latter vastly amplifying the former” (Aron, 2023: 138). The entanglement of inside and outside lay, however, at the root of a philosophical confusion between the internal condition of a political community and the external condition of relations among states. Aron thus criticized what he called a “philosophy of violence,” namely the view that equated all politics with an exercise of violence. Although such a philosophy grasped “the interweaving, the dialectic, the commingling, the confusion between party battles and those among cities,” intrastate politics remained, for Aron, clearly distinct from interstate politics. He listed two reasons: first, at the internal level there exists “a single regular armed force, that is, a monopoly of armed force” (Aron, 2023: 154); second, within the community the exercise of power rests on legitimation, it “claims to be founded not only on force but also on an idea or a principle of justice” (Aron, 2023: 154). And this was precisely a crucial aspect of Aron’s reasoning:

no power within a state can be solid if it is not accepted, and it cannot be accepted if it is not justified. It follows therefore that

the command of the few over all within cities indeed constitutes an aspect of their life; but such command becomes a regime or a legitimate power only by appealing to an idea and by claiming to correspond to divine law, to human law, or to the aspirations of those who govern, according to principles of legitimacy that vary in history (Aron, 2023: 138).

The distinction spelled out by Aron was the premise for his critique of every “cynical” view of power – that is, of all theories which, denying any role to legitimacy, made power coincide with violence. Among the latter he included, in particular, the idea of “symbolic violence” advanced in the essays written by his student Pierre Bourdieu with Jean-Claude Passeron, which had exerted a major influence on the student movement, as well as Herbert Marcuse’s critique of advanced capitalist societies and the positions of other radical intellectuals. What Aron reproached all these readings for was their occlusion of any difference between the many forms of constraint to which human beings are subject in society and violent coercion. He did not deny that “symbolic violence” truly exists – at school or in the workplace – but he could not accept that such forms of power could be equated with the exercise of violence.

Aron’s criticism of the idea of “symbolic violence,” like his objections to the various versions of the “philosophy of violence” (Sorel, Sartre, Fanon), revolved around the pivotal distinction between politics and war. Political action (including revolutionary action), insofar as it is distinct from martial action, is defined not by the aim of victory over the enemy, but by the intention to seize power within the community – a power that could only present itself as (or claim to be) legitimate. Within the course, political action was in fact understood as an action “whose object is the conquest and exercise of the right to command considered legitimate, meaning by this the command that one or a few exercise over all” (Aron, 2023: 245–246). In the conclusion – making explicit what had not always been clear during the lectures – Aron thus clarified that his inquiry into revolutionary political praxeology, while considering a form of action inevitably violent, nonetheless emphasized that the goal of seizing power required, beyond the exercise of physical force, a moral component:

since power is defined through the exercise of legitimate command and revolution is the conquest of the right to command, if those who aspire to this right do not hold it, they are for the most part compelled to resort to violence in order to obtain what is the primary condition of legitimate power, namely effectiveness. Nevertheless, every legitimate power entails a moral or psychological dimension, and this is why my analysis has continually oscillated between pure physical violence and the quest for legitimation, indispensable both for those who hold power and for those who must obey (Aron, 2023: 319).

In this direction, over the course of 1973, he concluded the discussion with an examination of the “revolutionary genius” of Lenin and Mao, and especially with a veritable celebration of the use the Chinese leader had made of the Formula. Despite the distance separating him from the French Maoists, Aron embraced the position of the Chinese Chairman, because the reading of the Formula proposed by the Great Helmsman moved precisely toward a sharp separation between war and politics. His stance fully converged with the aims Aron set for the course – namely, to criticize those hypotheses that inverted the Formula by recognizing in politics (internal to individual communities) the very same elements as in war.

Several scholars have highlighted Aron’s proximity to political realism (Adair-Totef, 2018; Campi, 1999; De Ligo, 2007, 2018; Molina, 2013; Panebianco, 1992), though it has often been noted that his relationship with the best-known versions of that tradition was rather critical. In this sense, for example, Alessandro Campi has described Aron’s perspective as a “heterodox realism,” a “moderate Machiavellianism,” and a “historical-critical realism” (Campi, 2015: 71). The author of *Peace and War among Nations*, Campi observes, “always took care to distinguish his position from that of those who, out of a mistaken sense of reality and history, reduce politics to the realm of force” and who, on such grounds, “reduce politics to the realm of pure force, take pleasure in an amoral and cynical posture, and limit themselves to recording facts as they present themselves in

their brutal evidence, thereby falling into flat positivism and reducing history to nature” (Campi, 2015: 58). In Aron’s perspective, therefore,

realism, considering the historical character of man and hence of politics, contrasts with naturalism, with positivism, and with any conservative and deterministic conception of human experience and history (Campi, 2015: 58).

From his youthful writings in the 1930s onward, he leveled a severe critique at the “pseudo-realism” of those who “claim to ground themselves in historical experience, in fragmentary regularities, or in eternal necessities” (Aron, 1938: 406).

The French scholar was not entirely insensitive to theses advanced, for example, by Konrad Lorenz’s comparative ethology, but he always kept his distance from adopting a “one-dimensional” anthropology centered solely on aggressive drives and the quest for power. Even in the 1973 course, precisely at the end of the final lecture, he returned to this point, observing that “man is violent, but not only as animals are,” for he is violent “also through faith and refusal” (Aron, 2023: 327). The reference to “faith” and “refusal” was anything but accidental, because it was precisely the importance he assigned to these dimensions that made the “false realism” unacceptable to him. Emblematic of Aron’s position in this sense was the critique he directed – focusing primarily on the international-relations variant of realism – at Hans J. Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr. “Obsessed with the concern to refute contractarian philosophy, the version of liberalism according to which the *homo politicus* could be disciplined only by respect for law and morality,” Aron wrote, “realists go so far as to oppose one anthropology to another anthropology and power to law (or morality)” (Aron, 1962: 677). In essence, for the French scholar, the limit of international-relations realism consisted in assuming that the motivations of political communities and statesmen did not undergo substantial transformations over the course of historical processes and were therefore uninfluenced by ideologies, regime types, and cultural context. The source of this distortion, Aron argued, lay precisely in the realist conviction that anthropological characteristics are defined once and for all and constantly guide statesmen’s decisions. “Having confused – through lack

of rigorous distinction – the eternal features and the historical particularities of international politics, theory and praxeology,” Aron concluded, “the realist school has ended up in an ideology comparable to the one it targeted with its criticisms” (Aron, 1962: 682). “True realism” – that which “takes account of the entire reality” – must instead “adapt itself not to the portrait of what international politics would be if statesmen were wise in their egoism, but to what it is, with the passions, follies, ideas, and violences of the century” (Aron, 1962: 682-683).

More generally, the main problem, according to Aron, was that the cynical vision of realism programmatically refused to recognize that even “political or moral ideas,” to which the analyst may appeal in comparing different regimes (and, in particular, in contrasting democratic regimes with totalitarian ones), “always form part of reality itself” (Aron, 1965: 53). The realist who sees politics only as a quest for power ends up being, in Aron’s view, merely a “false realist,” unable to see the complexity of a far more articulated real world:

The great illusion of cynical thought, obsessed with the struggle for power, consists in denying another aspect of reality: the search for legitimate power, for recognized authority, for the best regime. Men have never thought that politics was defined exclusively by the struggle for power. He who does not see the “struggle for power” aspect is naïve; he who sees only the “struggle for power” aspect is a false realist. The reality we study is a human reality; and of this reality the question of the legitimacy of authority is an integral part (Aron, 1965: 53).

The objection addressed to the philosophy of “false realism” stemmed from the very same conviction that, as we have seen, led Aron to criticize the inversions that turned Clausewitz’s maxim into the idea that politics is the continuation of war “by other means.” That objection, however, also had implications for how to conceive of the internal enemy. As noted, Aron first encountered Clausewitz in the 1930s, when, in Germany, he was passionately discussing the theses set out in Carl Schmitt’s *Begriff des Politischen*. That engagement accompanied Aron for the rest of his life, even though he seldom devoted a sustained critique to the German thinker. It was

likely no accident, however, that the jurist from Plettenberg's name appears at several points in the 1973 course. Aron's critical observations were closely connected to his conviction that revolutionary political action aimed not simply at defeating the enemy, but at seizing legitimate power.

After the war, Aron had occasion to meet Schmitt in Tübingen in 1953, and from then on – and thanks also to Julien Freund, who served as an intermediary – the two scholars exchanged letters intermittently. In one of his letters to Schmitt, in 1963, Aron outlined his criticisms of the German colleague's reflections on the enemy and, in particular, noted that the distinction between the conventional enemy and the absolute enemy was rather reductive, if only because one could clearly distinguish different kinds of absolute enemy, very different from one another, such as the biological enemy, the ideological enemy, and the political enemy (Tommissen, 1998: 175). In the 1973 course, some elements of these critical observations were taken up and further developed. One point of divergence concerned the features Schmitt attributed to the partisan, for Aron contested that the bond with the land could be considered, in the world of the 1960s and 1970s, a distinctive aspect of the partisan, who had by then become the revolutionary, bearer of a revolutionary ideology (Aron, 2023: 117-118). A second objection concerned the idea of absolute enmity, which Schmitt believed had been introduced by Lenin, whereas Aron thought it had already been conceived by Clausewitz. This idea was closely linked to total war, but there were in fact two ways of understanding the destruction of the enemy:

there is the biological sense and the sense that I would call, indifferently, symbolic or moral. The question of being or not being, in the case of enmity, can concern the physical extermination of nations – which is an extreme case, unfortunately not without examples in history but, all the same, exceptional among the so-called civilized states. Consequently, the notion of annihilation or of being/not being pertains rather, in the end, to moral or symbolic destruction: it is the question of political existence or of legitimate existence. By this I mean that he who denies a political enemy the right to exist does not necessarily wish to exterminate the bearers of the political idea he fights [...]. Now, the question of being and not being, or of the non-existence of the other, concerns precisely

the question of the existence or non-existence of the other against whom one fights. Non-recognition of the other leads to absolute enmity, but this enmity does not entail physical extermination; rather it implies a refusal of the other's existence. Such refusal is, so to speak, inevitably and by definition present in civil wars, because in civil wars one of the two contenders for power must necessarily disappear. I would almost say that the definition of a civil war is that it represents, for the two camps, a question of being and not-being. Once again, this is not a matter of physical extermination, but of moral or symbolic [destruction], hence the formula of unconditional surrender, as in the case of the U.S. Civil War. [...] The hallmark of revolutionary wars, of the historical situation in which we have lived since 1917, is that the introduction of a transnational revolutionary idea has as its almost inevitable consequence that wars among states, insofar as they still occur, entail an ideological and civil-war element. In other words, the traditional principles of the European law of nations – [...] – disappear from the moment the principle of civil enmity fuses with that of rivalry among states and war becomes popular or revolutionary (Aron, 2023: 134-135).

Schmitt's name also surfaces when Aron retraces the stages of the "criminalization of the enemy" (Aron, 2023: 144-145), as well as – again in a rather impressionistic yet anything but incidental way – in connection with his critical discussion of the conception of politics advanced by Julien Freund in his doctoral thesis. Regarding Schmitt's definition, Aron noted that the analogy between the oppositions true/false (to which, in fact, the jurist had not referred) or beautiful/ugly and the friend/enemy opposition was illegitimate: whereas the first two oppositions involve a valorization of something (the true and the beautiful) and a devaluation of something else (the false and the ugly), in politics nothing of the kind occurs: "The friend/enemy relation [...], by definition, does not entail a valorization, at least in a universal sense," in that certainly "each person devalues his own enemy, but the enemy repays him in kind" (Aron, 2023: 228). The point he sought to reach, however, lay in the structural difference between politics and war, as well as between revolutionary political action and war – at the heart of his entire reading and of his criticisms of the various reversals of the Formula (Antoniol, 2023; Guareschi, 2010).

As we have seen, politics, for Aron, cannot be understood as a continuation of war because between “internal” politics – what occurs within political communities – and “external” politics – what unfolds between political communities – there remains a substantive difference. Those who exercise power within a community, or who aspire to conquer it, must continuously secure the obedience of subjects and must therefore be perceived by them as “legitimate.” Those who aim to defeat an enemy in war, by contrast, simply seek to bend his will, even to eliminate him; in any case, they do not aim to be perceived by the enemy as a “legitimate” sovereign to whom it is ethically right to render obedience. In invoking the quest for legitimacy, Aron meant to argue that within communities – even on the part of those who sought to seize power by violence – it was not enough to wield power, that is, to command the exercise of force: it was also necessary to justify the exercise of power in moral terms. Mao’s teachings were exemplary in this respect for two reasons: first, because the Chinese leader conceived of war as a totality guided by politics; second, because he consistently regarded the moral factor as closely connected with the material one (Aron, 2023: 295-297). And it is precisely these elements that he reprises in his conception of revolutionary war, which is a war but within a state, aimed at conquering a power that must present itself as legitimate. For this reason, according to Aron, politics and war must be sharply distinguished, and the Formula must be interpreted in the sense of the subordination of war to politics, not as an identity: it is politics that sets the ends of war and calibrates the war effort to the importance of the objectives; war thus remains simply the realm of means, but without politics – charged with setting the aims of the war effort – it lacks a compass. To equate politics with war is therefore to ignore the distinction between the two domains, assimilating every kind of conflict and violence to those that specifically characterize war. Although twentieth-century politics had expanded the “gray zone” between domestic and international politics, and although the “partisan” had indeed become the protagonist of revolutionary wars around the world, the distinction remained and hinged precisely on the different goals that war and revolutionary political action set themselves: whereas war sought only to defeat the enemy, the goal of the partisan, the guerrilla, or the coup-maker was instead to seize legitimate power – consisting,

to be sure, in the effective governance of a territory, but also in the legitimacy of that government and hence in being obeyed.

At a time when strategic studies increasingly speak of “hybrid war,” “gray zones,” and the like, Aron’s operation remains undeniably valuable – if only to make us wary of certain rhetorical uses of bellicose metaphors that end up losing sight of the specificity of war. Viewed from a broader perspective, however, Aron’s idea that political action (even violent) differs from warfare in the strict sense because the former’s goal is the conquest of legitimate power risks forgetting some darker aspects of the relation of enmity and the forms in which hostility may present itself.

Among the various criticisms Aron levels at Schmitt, perhaps the most general is that he failed to recognize the foundational role of friendship in relation to enmity. Aron makes this observation to the jurist in the correspondence following the publication of *Peace and War among Nations*, and it is in some measure also the premise of the importance he attaches to legitimacy: to state that the goal of violent political action is the conquest of legitimate power implies the idea that the seizure of power must be presented as “just” for the entire community, and not simply imposed against enemies. In other words, even while practicing enmity, it is necessary to found order on friendship, inevitably invoking an idea of a good which – be it economic, religious, cultural, and so on – is nonetheless perceived as common. Prior to the identification of an external enemy, according to Aron, there is therefore friendship, *philia*, what is common, or what is perceived as common: friendship, the feeling of belonging to the same city, to the same fatherland. And it is this kind of foundation that does not disappear even in Lenin and Mao, who in fact wish to extend it (at least tendentially) to a planetary class. If such an objection truly grasps a problematic aspect of Schmitt’s hypothesis, the way Aron conceives legitimacy seems rather limited, and perhaps even less effective than the perspectives adopted by Morgenthau and Niebuhr, whom the French scholar had instead accused of being merely false realists.

When he charged Morgenthau and Niebuhr with considering a reality composed only of power and not also of moral and ideal components, Aron in many respects missed the mark, because neither thinker had actually neglected the moral dimension. Aron's call to take account of the whole of reality fit more aptly the cruder versions of realism, which, for example, assumed that one could explain states' choices on the basis of a "national interest" conceived as something "objective," rather than as the result of a particular way of conceiving the primary interests to be pursued. In this sense, in *Peace and War among Nations* he observed that "true realism" consisted in "recognizing the action of ideologies on diplomatic-strategic conduct," also noting that "no one can understand a state's diplomacy-strategy if he does not know its regime, if he has not studied the philosophy of those who govern it." Yet such attention did not prevent him from seeing the problematic relationship between power and morality, which Morgenthau and Niebuhr did have in view. The two American scholars had not revived Thrasymachus's cynical view that justice is the advantage of the stronger; rather, they conceived the relationship in more complex terms. Just as in the observation of politics it is impossible to attain a position that allows a fully "objective" view, so too morality can only be influenced by each person's subjective position and thus by the power relations in which everyone is entangled. In one of his early books, for example, Niebuhr wrote that moralists – who reproach realists for cynicism and call for compromise and peace – often fail to see the existing forms of coercion, reinforced by propaganda. Although Aron did not commit such an oversight, he nevertheless tended to draw a sharp distinction between morality and power, underestimating, for example, the role of what for Niebuhr was collective egoism: a form of group egoism nourished by cooperative sentiments, understood as morally positive, but which pursues the aim of conserving and extending the group's power. In this case, it was not a "false" realism that forgot moral factors, but a realism fully aware that these moral constraints are imposed on the members of every group and require of them behaviors that might sometimes be deemed reprehensible by common morality while – since they are performed for the group's "common good" – they are rewarded and considered honorable.

The problematic point in Aron's reasoning did not concern war in the strict sense so much as the possibility of reversing Clausewitz's Formula. As we have amply seen, for the French scholar war was indeed a continuation of politics by other means, whereas it was theoretically incorrect to invert the elements of the phrase and thus to conceive politics as a continuation of war by other means. This argument certainly made sense with respect to Aron's polemical adversaries: equating war with the "symbolic violence" exercised by the school over pupils, or with the exploitation of wage workers by capitalists, was clearly an operation that stripped the military clash proper of any specific purchase. Aron's argument was, however, less apt with regard to other political regimes, because his appeal to legitimacy seemed to exclude that, even within the political community, there might be forms of legitimate exercise of violence entirely analogous to those used in war. Just as ideology could shape the way national interest was conceived in different countries, so it could, for example, influence how national security was understood and thus how potential enemies were defined. In other words, if ideology was indispensable for legitimizing power over the group, that same ideology could also establish who counted as a legitimate member of the group and who, for various reasons, did not – or could not – fully belong.

This problematic feature was evident above all in Aron's analysis of the role of ideology in totalitarianism. Although he paid great attention to the ideological dimension in his inquiry into international politics, he never clearly defined what, in his eyes, characterized ideology and, for the most part, he conceived it as a "false belief," incapable of grasping the reality of social phenomena (Boudon, 1991). For Aron, Angelo Panebianco has written, ideology was, on the one hand, "the set, more or less systematically connected, of ideas that guide political action and confer legitimacy on different political formulas," and, on the other hand, a secular religion, a "system of ideas and values that claims to provide a definitive answer to all the questions about the past, present, and future of human history" (Panebianco, 1992: 62). Moreover, although over the course of his studies he also addressed "totalitarianism" in a non-episodic way (Aron, 1965), he rather paradoxically did not assign significant importance to the role that, in totalitarian regimes, was occupied by what Hannah Arendt had called the "objective enemy": "an individual whose dangerous thoughts must

be provoked or whose past justifies suspicion, but a ‘carrier of tendencies’ like the carrier of a disease” (Arendt, 1951: 551)

In other words, Aron did not grasp how specifically “ideological” elements could affect the perception of security and the identification of those “objective enemies” that threatened a regime’s and society’s health and order, and against whom a political regime could legitimate recourse to violence presented not only as necessary but also as morally right for the country’s and the nation’s future security. Had he taken this step, he would indeed have had to problematize the sharp distinction between politics and war – the pivot of his argument – and would have had, in some measure, to acknowledge that internal politics could truly represent a continuation of war, because totalitarian regimes, in conducting their permanent mobilization against objective enemies, waged neither war in the Clausewitzian sense nor civil war in the strict sense, but a war against pathological elements to “defend society,” to make it (in their eyes, of course) “better.”

By a truly singular coincidence, Michel Foucault – who also arrived at the Collège de France in 1970 – found himself delivering his lectures at the institute on place Marcelin-Berthelot on themes which, though apparently far removed from the knots Aron addressed, developed an argument that seemed exactly the reverse of that articulated by his older colleague. From the moment of his arrival at the Collège, Foucault pursued a research project aimed at studying power from a new “genealogical” perspective, which considered war – in fact understood in a very broad sense, as a term able to identify every form of manifest or latent conflict – as the key to reconstructing the microphysics of power. For Foucault as well, that line of reflection culminated in 1976 with the publication of *La volonté de savoir*, which appeared the same year as Aron’s two volumes on Clausewitz. Unlike his colleague, who reaffirmed the validity of the Formula, Foucault, in introducing his method of studying power, asked: “Should we then invert the Formula and say that politics is war pursued by other means?” The answer he provided emphasized that, although a distinction could be maintained, it was nevertheless necessary to consider them as “two different strategies (but ready to overturn into one another) for integrating these unbalanced, heterogeneous, unstable, tense relations of force” (Foucault, 1976). This conclusion was, for Foucault, a point of arrival reached through the path he had taken

in previous years, including by engaging (never publicly acknowledged) with the hypotheses advanced by Carl Schmitt in the *Begriff des Politischen*, which Aron himself had had translated into French in 1972 and included in a series he directed (Antoniol, 2023).

The planes on which Aron and Foucault conducted their arguments were abyssally distant in methods and aims, but perhaps it is precisely the genealogical analysis the author of *Discipline and Punish* pursued in the courses of the early 1970s that can be regarded as a development – in a “genealogical” direction – of Aron’s anti-positivist realism. Foucault did not follow his colleague in the critique of Machiavellianism and of the tendency to reduce “reality” solely to power while forgetting the role of values, culture, and ideology – what the author of *The Opium of the Intellectuals* calls “false realism.” Rather, drawing on Nietzsche’s lesson, which he interpreted in a highly original key, he traced values, culture, and ideology back to those “partial truths” forged as instruments of battle within the perpetual war of power. In this way, Foucault, in many respects, pushes to the extreme the realist conviction that power can shape every aspect of associative life, and thus even the words, techniques, and gaze of those who investigate it, in a kind of insoluble short circuit. In indicating the path of genealogy, Foucault thus abandons the pretensions of an objective observation and recognizes that knowledge itself of the “effective truth of the thing” is, in the end, produced within the very battle one would like to observe, understand, and evaluate “objectively.” By taking this path, the genealogical realism we can discern in Foucault’s contribution also points to a direction for rethinking the realist tradition – one that avoids not only the shortcut of cynicism and the distortions of evolutionary declensions, but also the confusions of every variant of positivism. And, rather paradoxically, it allows us to seek the meeting point between their inquiries that Aron and Foucault – for many reasons, hardly worth enumerating – did not wish or did not have the opportunity to find.

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