

Two Critical Spectators: José Ortega y Gasset and Raymond Aron

Brendon Westler and Aurelian Craiutu

Abstract: This essay examines the role of “critical spectatorship” in the writings of two distinguished European intellectuals, José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) and Raymond Aron (1905–1983). We begin the paper by commenting on the struggle between civilization and barbarism, a fundamental topic in their works. We then examine the rhetoric of going beyond the political left and right, which both Ortega and Aron used in their writings. Next, we turn to the concept of “critical spectatorship” that is central to their thought and comment on the similarities and differences between their forms of social and political criticism. We conclude by drawing a few conclusions on the relevance of Ortega’s and Aron’s ideas for us today.

Having political opinions is not a matter of having an ideology once and for all; it is a question of taking the right decisions in changing circumstances.

—Raymond Aron

Gazing into the Abyss

The recent videos of prisoners being burned alive or beheaded in broad daylight, bloodthirsty zealots desecrating graves, the butchering of nonbelievers, and the enslavement of women have offered us vivid images of a possible

Brendon Westler is a doctoral candidate in political science at Indiana University, 210 Woodburn Hall, 1100 E. 7th St., Bloomington, IN 47405 (bwestler@indiana.edu).

Aurelian Craiutu is Professor of political science at Indiana University (acraiutu@indiana.edu).

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rapid descent into barbarism in a region from which our Western civilization emerged. We have been horrified by—and are still reeling from—the sheer brutality of these public executions and the fanaticism of their perpetrators whose norms and values seem entirely alien to us. Yet it is far from clear how we can respond effectively to these challenges which have shown how quickly society can descend into the darkest form of barbarism.

One thing, however, is beyond doubt. These tragic events are a timely reminder of the fragility of the values and norms undergirding what we call “civilization.” This is not, of course, the first time that we have had the opportunity to reflect on this tragic yet important lesson. About a century ago, dark forces were unleashed in the heart of the continent that prided itself on being the carrier of a superior form of civilization.¹ With the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914, Europe entered a long “age of anxiety” after a century of relative calm and prosperity. The drumbeat of barbarism sounded in the very heart of our “civilized” world before setting the entire world on flames. The rise of totalitarianism gave a new sense of urgency to these problems and showed in plain daylight that civilization’s hold is fragile and unstable. Today, the decades from the 1920s to the 1950s may seem a part of another world, reinforcing the belief that the past is, indeed, foreign. But as we look at the world around us, we realize that this is a costly illusion. That is why, as we enter our own (postmodern) age of anxiety fraught with new dangers, it proves useful to examine how European intellectuals responded to similar challenges and how they sought to preserve the values of civilization threatened by the rise of totalitarian ideologies and secular religions such as Nazism and communism.

With this aim, we turn to the works of two distinguished European intellectuals, José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) and Raymond Aron (1905–1983), whose writings displayed a remarkably firm and courageous commitment to the values and principles of liberal civilization in dark times. Although Aron and Ortega did not belong, strictly speaking, to the same generation and wrote in different national contexts, their intellectual agendas overlapped as both confronted the challenges posed by the rise of mass society and totalitarianism. Their common task was to confront the breakdown of reason and the triumph of uninhibited violence while resisting the vortex of totalitarianism. What made them different from others is that they did all this with civility, responsibility, and firmness and remained independent spirits unmoved by the siren songs of political ideologies, left and right. By rereading them today we witness vicariously the mightiest storms of the last century and are warned, to paraphrase Nietzsche, that the ice beneath

¹For a comprehensive account, see Bernard Wasserstein, *Barbarism and Civilization: A History of Europe in Our Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Wasserstein begins his book by quoting Walter Benjamin’s claim that “there is no document of civilization that is not simultaneously a document of barbarism” (vii).

us might become “too thin” if we are not prepared to fight valiantly for—and affirm—the main values and principles of liberal civilization.²

There are several reasons for examining Aron and Ortega together for the first time in a systematic way. It is indeed surprising that nothing has been written yet about their important intellectual affinities. Toward the end of his life, Aron acknowledged the similarities between their political outlooks in a text that he was supposed to deliver at the Ortega y Gasset Institute in Madrid in May 1983.³ Half a century after reading Ortega’s *The Revolt of the Masses*, Aron compared their intellectual agendas and forms of social and political criticism. He suggested that, for all of their differences, they belonged to the same “spiritual family,”⁴ a common liberal cultural and political universe placing special emphasis on individual liberty, political pluralism, and human dignity. As heirs to the political tradition of Montesquieu and Tocqueville, Ortega and Aron defended such ideals not only in principle but also in their mood and tone. While many of their contemporaries believed that “liberalism was the true enemy,”⁵ Ortega and Aron dissented from this widespread view. And yet, historians of twentieth-century political thought have not given them the recognition they fully deserve, alongside Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, and Friedrich von Hayek. Responding to an epoch which was “the age of the intellectual organization of political hatreds,”⁶ the works of Ortega and Aron represented two courageous attempts to stave off the new “barbarian invasions”⁷ and fence civilization off from destructive temptations. In so doing, they expressed the aspirations, fears, and hopes of two minds deeply impregnated by the history of the twentieth century.

Of the two, Ortega, who wrote on a wide array of topics and straddled different disciplines, may be less familiar to political theorists. Consequently, he

²As quoted in Stefan Zweig, *Nietzsche*, trans. Will Stone (London: Hesperus, 2013), 87.

³Aron’s poor health prevented him from delivering the text in Madrid. The original French text was published posthumously as “Ortega y Gasset et la ‘révolte des masses,’” *Commentaire* 40 (Winter 1987–1988): 733–40. An English translation appeared under the title “The Revolt of the Masses,” *Partisan Review* 55, no. 3 (1988): 359–70.

⁴Aron, “The Revolt of the Masses,” 369.

⁵This phrase is taken from Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 17; also see 229–45. On the history of (European) liberalism, see Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); and J. G. Merquoir, *Liberalism: Old and New* (Boston: Twayne, 1991).

⁶Julien Benda, *The Betrayal of the Intellectuals*, trans. Richard Aldington (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 21.

⁷We borrow the title of a well-known movie by the Canadian director Denys Arcand.

is particularly deserving of reevaluation as an underappreciated *political* thinker. Yet much the same can be said of Aron, whose reputation among political theorists remains fuzzy to this day, with the possible exception of those interested in issues of war and peace (he is better known among sociologists).⁸ What makes these two European intellectuals worth reading today is that they illustrate an original form of political sensibility and responsibility in the fight to save liberal civilization, one that offers valuable guidance in the fight against new forms of barbarism. Ortega and Aron sensed the challenging task of defending liberty and political moderation in dark times all the more keenly for having understood the complex and delicate nature of the values and principles undergirding European civilization. They did not fall prey to grand schemes of social and political improvement, nor did they write as “prophets of extremity,”⁹ in search of flamboyant narratives and radical cures to the alleged ills of modernity. Furthermore, although worried by the rise of political extremism, they did not give up on politics altogether, nor did they retreat into a mythical hermitage of pure thought. While others were preparing themselves for the appearance of the last gods, Ortega and Aron defended liberty, pluralism, and political moderation and displayed remarkable courage and responsibility as social and political critics.

What makes their intellectual and political trajectories so interesting and singular (and justifies discussing them together) is that both thinkers attempted to transcend, in their own way, the classical categories of left and right while expressing their deep commitment to the principles of liberal politics. Ortega and Aron offered original answers to the question of how one could maintain a degree of intellectual independence while defending the values of the open society in a volatile and polarizing context. Both had little patience with the then fashionable idea of engagement as an end in itself or as a response to an existential imperative.¹⁰ At a time when “the ‘clerks’ began to play the game of political passions,”¹¹ Ortega and Aron criticized their fellow intellectuals for becoming “Churchmen,”¹² that is, for setting up their actions as a religion *sui generis* and uncritically enlisting their ideas in the service of larger entities such as the state, the race, the party, or the

⁸In *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), Michael Walzer devotes a few lines to Ortega, whom he describes, inaccurately, as a “conservative philosopher” with a “sardonic and disdainful” tone (24, 25). Aron is never mentioned in Walzer’s book in spite of his prominent role as a social critic in postwar France.

⁹The phrase is Allan Megill’s in *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

¹⁰For a critique of this obsession with political engagement, see Judt, *Past Imperfect*, esp. chaps. 1, 3, 6–7.

¹¹Benda, *Betrayal of the Intellectuals*, 31.

¹²*Ibid.*, 39.

nation. Finally, for all their differences, Ortega and Aron displayed surprising affinities as social and political critics. The first put forth the model of *el espectador* while the second advocated that of *le spectateur engagé*. The linguistic similarity, far from accidental, suggests the existence of more substantive affinities that we seek to highlight in this essay.

We begin by commenting on the struggle between civilization and barbarism as reflected in both Ortega's and Aron's writings. Next, we examine their rhetoric of going beyond left and right, before exploring the concept of "critical spectatorship" central to their writings. We end by drawing a few conclusions on the contemporary relevance of Ortega's and Aron's types of social and political criticism for us today.

Civilization and Barbarism

The West can still produce a Caesar but not a Goethe, Oswald Spengler predicted as Germany began its second descent into the abyss in the 1930s.¹³ All prophecies must be taken with a grain of salt, and Spengler's is no exception. Yet his prescient words pointed to the looming crisis that was about to bring yet another devastating world war and a return of barbarism. The latter was already visible in the exaltation of violence justified as a necessity for bringing about a new world order, and the uncritical extolment of the masses as the main actor on the political scene.

As Henri Massis argued in *Défense de l'Occident* (1927), a book widely read in the epoch (but forgotten today), the survival of civilization depends on its ability to muster enough forces to defend itself against the new, powerfully organized, forms of barbarism.¹⁴ Both Aron and Ortega shared Massis's sense of urgency, although they proposed different diagnoses and solutions for defending the values of the Western world. In Ortega's case, what began as a relatively narrow concern for the "backwardness" of Spanish society slowly evolved into a persistent fear that Western civilization might be bound for an irreversible decline. By the end of the 1920s, while the Old World was edging closer to the abyss, Ortega's tone became darker and more pessimistic as he realized that the evils which had plagued Spain were (to some extent) similarly present throughout the whole of Western Europe. In *The Revolt of the Masses* (1929), he sounded the alarm for a

¹³The exact quote is: "We Germans will never again produce a Goethe, but indeed a Caesar" (Oswald Spengler, *Pessimismus?* [Berlin: Stilke, 1921], 79).

¹⁴A fragment from Massis's *Défense de l'Occident* was translated into English by F. S. Flint under the title "Defense of the West" in *The Living Age*, no. 330 (July–Sept. 1926): 536–45. For a collection of writings sharing Massis's concerns, see *The Crisis of Modern Times: Perspectives from "The Review of Politics," 1939–1962*, ed. A. James McAdams (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

Europe in decline, “without any concealment of the brutality of its features.”¹⁵

Many readers of *The Revolt of the Masses* have believed Ortega to be doing little more than contributing another voice to the growing chorus of intellectuals, from Gustave Le Bon to Nietzsche, who feared the rise of mass society and rejected its values and culture.¹⁶ But Ortega’s agenda was quite different and more complex. His deceptively simple book was read by many, but its context and meaning were understood by few.¹⁷ The fact that Ortega felt the need to add a long prologue and a substantive epilogue (*Prólogo para franceses* and *Epílogo para ingleses*) is revealing. Together they expressed Ortega’s fundamental commitment to liberal politics,¹⁸ and made clear that *The Revolt of the Masses* had actually been much less about the “mass-man” than has been typically believed. It was, in fact, an ambitious form of social, cultural, and political criticism that offered an agenda for saving Western civilization from ruin.¹⁹

Ortega’s critique of mass society sought to provide an answer to the erosion of faith in political opposition and critical debate, the twin principles undergirding the functioning of the very representative institutions that had contributed to the progress of European civilization.²⁰ He deplored the fact that the new fashion in Europe was “to have done with discussion” and that public opinion expressed a growing distaste for “all forms of intercommunication which imply acceptance of objective standards, ranging from conversation to Parliament.”²¹ Ortega refused to accept that, to use Carl Schmitt’s

¹⁵José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: Norton, 1932), 19; *Obras Completas*, vol. 4 (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1966), 149. Quotations from Ortega are drawn from existing English translations where available; otherwise, translations are ours. References to Ortega include the location of the text in *Obras Completas*, vols. 1–11 (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1963–69), hereafter OC.

¹⁶For a survey of these thinkers, see Joseph V. Femia, *Against the Masses: Varieties of Anti-Democratic Thought since the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁷On Ortega’s political context, see Béatrice Fonck, “Historia y política en *La rebelión de las masas*,” *Revista de Occidente*, no. 73 (1987): 75–87. For a discussion of Ortega’s reception in the United States, see John T. Graham, *The Social Thought of Ortega y Gasset: A Systematic Synthesis in Postmodernism and Interdisciplinarity* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 278.

¹⁸On Ortega’s liberalism, see Pedro Cerezo Gálan, “Razón vital y liberalismo en Ortega y Gasset,” *Revista de Occidente*, no. 120 (1991): 33–58; Victor Ouimette, *Los intelectuales españoles y el naufragio del liberalismo (1923–1936)*, vol. 2 (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 1998), 103–287; Ángel Peris Suay, “El Liberalismo de Ortega más allá del individualismo,” *Revista de estudios Ortegaianos*, no. 6 (May 2003): 166–98.

¹⁹Graham, *Social Thought of Ortega y Gasset*, 289.

²⁰For an extended discussion of Ortega’s political theory of the masses, see Alejandro de Haro Honrubia, *Élites y masas: Filosofía y política en la obra de José Ortega y Gasset* (Madrid: Editorial Biblioteca Nueva, 2008).

²¹Ortega, *The Revolt of the Masses*, 74; OC, 4:190.

words, “the development of modern mass democracy has made argumentative public discussion an empty formality.”²² Such a view, he insisted, was both wrong and dangerous. Consequently, Ortega opposed those who regarded openness of debate as a superfluous decoration, or as a useless and embarrassing relic of the past.

This crisis, the Spaniard insisted, was not only political, but also existential; the decline of discussion and debate represented a distinctive syndrome of a deeper and more significant threat. In Ortega’s words, the real danger came from “a renunciation of the common life based on culture... and a return to the common life of barbarism,”²³ that is, the disintegration of peoples into groups incapable of living with one another. If people were no longer interested in speaking to and learning from one another, what would keep them together in social and political units? This “tendency to disassociation”²⁴ was the definition of the barbarism which Ortega opposed. Time and again,²⁵ he returned to this theme, rejecting the forces which tend to make people scatter into disparate groups, each “separate and hostile to one another.”²⁶

Ortega believed that the crisis unleashed by the “revolt of the masses” demanded a firm response; consequently, the form of “civilization” he defended was the antidote to the poison spreading through interwar Europe. It reaffirmed “the will to live in common”²⁷ and gave people peaceful ways to solve their political differences. In chapter 8 of *The Revolt of the Masses*, he wrote: “Restrictions, standards, courtesy, indirect methods, justice, reason! ... They are all summed up in the word civilization.... By means of all these there is an attempt to make possible the city, the community, common life.”²⁸ It is not a mere coincidence that Ortega viewed both Bolshevism and fascism (which rejected such values) as two forms of barbarism, which he unambiguously denounced as “false dawns” and warned that they would not bring “the morning of a new day, but of some archaic day.”²⁹ In promoting a single “correct” interpretation of the world, Fascist and Bolshevik movements furthered the tendency toward disassociation by eliminating civility, pluralism, discussion, and debate. Against this, Ortega longed for political integration and union, resulting in his early call for increased

²²Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Government*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 6.

²³Ortega, *The Revolt of the Masses*, 74; OC, 4:190.

²⁴Ibid., 76; OC, 4:191.

²⁵In addition to *The Revolt of the Masses*, see, e.g., *Invertebrate Spain* (New York: Norton, 1974) (OC, 3:37–130); and *La redención de las provincias*, in OC, 11:181–332.

²⁶Ortega, *The Revolt of the Masses*, 76; OC, 4:191.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., 75; OC, 4:191.

²⁹Ibid., 94; OC, 4:205.

European cohesion in the form of a “United States of Europe,” seeing in the latter the possibility for “the plurality of Europe” to be “substituted by its formal unity.”³⁰

At times, Ortega would let his despair become visible and was tempted to endorse a step-by-step withdrawal of intellectuals “into the background, and if need be into the catacombs of the social scene.”³¹ Nonetheless, he never abandoned his belief that intellectuals must not remain silent in the fight between civilization and barbarism. Had he retreated from public life, it would have been a concession to the forces of disassociation and barbarism he so disliked. Instead, he continued to function as a provocateur for both Spain and the West. By drawing his readers into an ongoing intellectual dialogue, he practiced an effective type of social and cultural criticism—critical spectatorship—that would not condemn intellectuals to absolute solitude and would allow them to effectively express their political and humanitarian pathos.

Aron was equally worried by the obvious signs of decline of Western civilization in interwar Europe and the increasing fragility of its liberal institutions. Like Ortega, he noted that his contemporaries were slowly losing faith in the capacity of liberal-democratic institutions to meet their needs and was dismayed by their increasing disregard for the rule of law and legality and their preference for emergency measures instead of laws.³² Such trends, Aron believed, posed significant threats to the future of liberal democracy and Western civilization. Accordingly, he called upon all liberal-minded spirits to formulate a *sui generis* “conservative” doctrine that would reaffirm the importance of individual rights, patriotism, and liberty and provide a set of institutions that offered a chance to save the heritage of the Enlightenment and preserve the values of rationalism and liberalism.³³

For Aron, the three years he lived in Germany between 1930 and 1933 were an eye-opening experience that constituted his real political education. In many ways, as Lord Dahrendorf later said, Germany was Aron’s “fate” since he witnessed the gradual demise of the Weimar Republic and the growth of National Socialism. Hitler’s accession to power, Aron argued in “Une révolution antiprolétarienne,” was not a fortuitous event. Hitler did not seize power on his own in 1933; instead power had been “given” to him by a combination of resigned bankers and industrialists who ended up

³⁰Ibid., 139; OC, 4:241.

³¹Ortega, *Concord and Liberty*, trans. Helene Weyl (New York: Norton, 1946), 51n1; OC, 5:517.

³²See Aron, *L’Homme contre les tyrans*, in *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 209–10. All quotations from this book are from the Gallimard (Quarto) edition; the translations are ours, unless noted otherwise.

³³Aron, “L’avenir des religions séculières,” in “Raymond Aron, 1905–1983: Histoire et politique. Textes, études et témoignages,” special issue, *Commentaire*, nos. 28 and 29 (1985): 382.

being outplayed by a shrewd demagogue.³⁴ Aron understood early on that National Socialism was going to be a catastrophe for European civilization insofar as it was seeking to revive an almost religious hostility between peoples which Germany's fragile liberal institutions would be powerless to contain. The National Socialist Party was particularly dangerous because it propelled Germany "toward its ancient dream and its perennial sin," that is, the sin of "defining itself proud in its singularity," and losing itself in myths about itself and a surrounding hostile world.³⁵

National Socialism taught Aron an important lesson about the power of irrational forces in history and reminded him of the brittleness of the institutions and values of Western civilization. But he went a step further than his Spanish counterpart in his comments on the rise of "secular religions." Fascism and communism, Aron noted in 1943, are two forms of secular religion that occupied in the souls of people the place that once belonged to religious faith, now lost.³⁶ As Manichean religions of collective salvation, they admitted nothing that would be superior in authority and dignity to the objectives of their movements. In turn, they fostered what Aron called "permanent mobilization"³⁷ on the part of their believers, requiring their total commitment. As such, they provided an *Ersatz* of a true religion, offering a final (distant) goal and a clear principle of authority meant to put an end to the prevailing chaos. Self-proclaimed providential figures, demagogues, populists, and adventurers could arise at any moment and thus destroy centuries-old institutions and norms because the soil had already been prepared for them. They exercised huge influence over disintegrated and desperate masses ready to abandon themselves into the hands of charismatic leaders. The logic was a perverse one: "Collective beliefs give birth to prophets and the Caesars invent their own religion."³⁸

It was during Aron's sojourn in Germany, watching one of the most tragic events of the twentieth century, that he conceived of the idea of being a critical spectator engaged in the fight to save civilization from a new form of barbarism.³⁹ That attitude, he understood later, did not presuppose detachment from reality; it demanded instead that one try to grasp the ideas that had made events possible and motivated peoples and their leaders to act in a certain way. In the context of interwar Europe, such a position required

³⁴Aron, "Une révolution antiprolétarienne," *Commentaire*, nos. 28 and 29 (1985): 299–310.

³⁵Raymond Aron, *Memoirs: Fifty Years of Political Reflection*, trans. George Holloch (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), 58.

³⁶Aron, "L'avenir des religions séculières," 369–83.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 374.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 378.

³⁹In his memoirs, Aron recalled the words of a German colleague: "You will always be a spectator, a critical spectator, you will not have the courage to commit yourself to action that carries the movement of crowds and of history" (*Memoirs*, 49).

that one respond firmly to Fascist demagoguery not only by a contrary form of propaganda but also by reflecting on the sources of totalitarianism, highlighting its revolutionary nature and its originality, and contrasting it with the “human ideal of revolution.”⁴⁰

An excellent case in point was the lecture Aron delivered in June 1939 at the Société française de philosophie entitled “États démocratiques et états totalitaires.”⁴¹ In this important text, he outlined the differences between the two types of states, showed the limits of pacifism, and highlighted the conditions of survival for the democratic regimes. Since the new totalitarian regimes were revolutionary at their core, Aron believed, the democratic regimes had to be seen as essentially “conservative,”⁴² having to assume this role in full awareness of their duties. This implied, among other things, that when the people no longer believed in the worth of the regime under which they lived and considered it not worth fighting for, it was all the more urgent and important to stand up for the values and principles of liberal democracy. This task required heroic virtues in liberal democracies, virtues that had to be reawakened and kept alive through deliberate effort and concerted action.⁴³

In *L’Homme contre les tyrans*, Aron explored many of the same themes present in Ortega’s *The Revolt of the Masses* and its subsequent prologue and epilogue. Originally published in 1944 in New York in the *Civilisation* series directed by Jacques Maritain, Aron’s volume came out in Paris two years later and contained pieces that had originally appeared as articles in *La France Libre*. It was a genuine tour de force, written with verve and dealing with important matters such as political liberty, despotism and tyranny, the weaknesses of democracy, bureaucracy and fanaticism, enthusiasm, violence, and war. In a chapter entitled “The Birth of Tyrannies,” Aron examines the originality of totalitarian regimes, left and right, which he ascribes to their combination of technical rationality with propaganda, charismatic leaders, and a detailed administration of things.⁴⁴ They are popular despotisms or demagogical Caesarisms, offering a mixture of personal and arbitrary power, absolute authority, popular consent, and popular enthusiasm.⁴⁵ These regimes, Aron added, are led by

⁴⁰Aron, *L’Homme contre les tyrans*, 140.

⁴¹This lecture was published in *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*, 55–106. It was translated into English and republished as an afterword to Raymond Aron, *Thinking Politically: A Liberal in the Age of Ideology*, ed. Daniel J. Mahoney and Brian Anderson (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1997), 325–47. For more details, see Daniel J. Mahoney, *The Conservative Foundations of the Liberal Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2011), 165–67.

⁴²Aron, “États démocratiques et états totalitaires,” 62.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 77. The notion of heroism is also mentioned by Jacques Maritain in the conversation that followed Aron’s lecture (see *ibid.*, 78).

⁴⁴See Aron, *L’Homme contre les tyrans*, 137.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 206.

new elites which have the taste of violence and authority pushed to the extremes, and master perfectly the technique of acting over human beings.⁴⁶ They cultivate military virtues—virtues of action, self-denial, and devotion—rather than liberal ones, such as respect for persons and individual autonomy. These leaders exploit the “community of resentments and hopes” shared by isolated and rootless individuals as well as their dissatisfaction with a political and economic system which proved incapable of giving them order and security. The Leviathan state that emerges from this chaos is never going to be a state of parties, Aron warned, but the state of a single party intolerant of other groups and unwilling to allow for free political competition and opposition.

The proper response from the defenders of liberal democracy to this threat, Aron argued, was not resigned pacifism but a conscious effort to rekindle the faith in civilization and the principles of liberalism, legality, and parliamentarism. It is interesting that in *L'Homme contre les tyrans*, Aron used Ortega's definition of civilization as the opposite of barbarism. Civilization, he wrote quoting the Spaniard, amounts to a sustained effort to reduce violence and contain its effects as much as possible.⁴⁷ This was a type of heroism which called for reawakening those values that make possible a peaceful life in common: devotion to the common good, trust in one's fellow citizens, and respect for legality. In Aron's view, in order to save liberal democracies from the threats posed by the rise of totalitarianism, many things would be needed, beginning with reaffirming the importance of the rule of law and pluralism and ending with the cultivation of discipline, self-restraint, and civility. Next, Aron insisted, one should treat people with respect by not considering them as means to one's own ends (or objects of propaganda to be brainwashed in view of a distant goal), but by recognizing them as ends in themselves. This, he maintained, is a courageous stance that requires at times a “morality of heroism.”⁴⁸ People must want to win and should be prepared to fight for the very principles and values that sustain their life together as free and equal citizens. They may not allow anyone to use elections and the parliamentary tribune to impose their own absolute power. Aron insisted on the key role of this form of “conservatism”⁴⁹ in the defense of Western civilization, arguing that this could be seen as a liberal and forward-looking form of conservatism, one that seeks to save individual dignity and personal autonomy and is not fixated dogmatically on conserving an obsolete form of tradition or set of institutions.

Drawing on a theme that also resonated with Ortega, Aron argued that another important condition for the survival of liberal regimes was the

⁴⁶Aron, “États démocratiques et états totalitaires,” 61.

⁴⁷Aron, *L'Homme contre les tyrans*, 137.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 219.

⁴⁹Aron, “États démocratiques et états totalitaires,” 79.

creation of new ruling elites which would have confidence in their political and historical mission and would not fall prey to Machiavellianism and cynicism.⁵⁰ Although their views on elites were not identical,⁵¹ both Ortega and Aron understood that creating new elites would only be a first step toward saving liberal-democratic regimes threatened by the rise of totalitarianism. What had to be rebuilt at the same time was “a minimum of faith and common will”⁵² without which liberal democracies could not function properly. Democracies will survive, Aron wrote in the early 1940s, only if they could overcome their own natural propensity to pacifism and hedonism and would show themselves capable of responding to the demands of modern life by eliciting a renewed commitment to and faith in the values of civilization.⁵³

Thus, the rise of mass society and totalitarianism convinced Ortega and Aron of the fragility of liberal institutions and values and of the need to do whatever was possible and necessary to save them. They came to better appreciate the fragility and the role of liberal institutions and rights in supporting life in common, which stood in constant danger of being undermined from within. Whereas an increasing number of their contemporaries underwent a gradual and irreversible transformation into monsters committed to the cult of brute force, resembling Eugène Ionesco’s famous “rhinoceros,”⁵⁴ Ortega and Aron voiced their staunch opposition to the various forms of “rhinocerotitis,” denouncing the rise of extremism and the increasing ideological polarization and conformism that subverted independent thinking, moral autonomy, and free will. Such movements instilled in both Ortega and Aron a deep distrust toward political labels and a desire to transcend them, while reaffirming their belief in freedom and the spiritual mission of humanity.

Neither Left nor Right

Writing in 1937 in a Europe whose descent toward barbarism had brought it to the precipice of war, Ortega summed up his political beliefs in a striking

⁵⁰Ibid., 70.

⁵¹Unlike Ortega, Aron expressed little interest in this issue. His more democratic form of liberalism differed from the highly meritocratic form preferred by Ortega, who was suspicious of democracy. The Spaniard criticized the mass man lost in the crowd and contemplated the emergence of a new aristocracy (composed of writers, artists, doctors, and engineers) capable of adopting the widest possible perspectives from which to view and interpret events. For more details, see Andrew Dobson, *An Introduction to the Politics and Philosophy of José Ortega y Gasset* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 78.

⁵²Aron, “États démocratiques et états totalitaires,” 70.

⁵³See Aron, *L’Homme contre les tyrans*, 220.

⁵⁴See Eugène Ionesco, *Rhinoceros and Other Plays*, trans. Derek Prouse (New York: Grove, 1960).

statement. "Aligning oneself with the left, as with the right," he claimed in the prologue to the French edition of *The Revolt of the Masses*, "is only one of the numberless ways open to man of being an imbecile: both are forms of moral hemiplegia."⁵⁵ Ortega's claim was much more than a memorable aphorism. It was, in fact, nothing less than a passionate *cri de coeur* against political extremism and intellectual servitude as well as a plea for preserving one's intellectual independence and autonomy in an age of increasing ideological conformism. In his view, neither the left nor the right could ever claim monopoly on political knowledge and therefore neither ought to be followed unconditionally. The tendency towards partisanship was, for Ortega, "one of the lowest, most despicable, most ridiculous diseases of our age."⁵⁶ Instead, one must navigate political waters with prudence and discernment in such a way that one's actions are always adjusted to the shifting circumstances and in keeping with the larger goal of preserving the values of a free and open society.

In his essay on Ortega, Aron explicitly referred to the Spaniard's rejection of both the left and right, considering it to be consistent with his own political vision. This may come as a surprise to those for whom Aron was a man of the right. "Had I remembered this formulation," Aron wrote, "I would have found a better answer to those who asked me whether I was on the right or the left."⁵⁷ Much like Ortega, Aron often felt uncomfortable aligning himself with either the left or the right, even if he was a staunch defender of liberal democracy and could be regarded as a conservative liberal (in the European sense of the term). Some of his contemporaries took him for a man of the right and a Gaullist even if in reality he was neither an unconditional supporter of General de Gaulle nor was his mind always in sync with some of those on the right who fought for freedom against totalitarianism. Aron once described himself as "a man without party, who is all the more unbearable because he takes his moderation to excess and hides his passions under his arguments."⁵⁸ Early on in his career, in an article from January 1933, he offered this self-portrait: "I am neither of the right nor the left, neither communist nor nationalist, no more radical than I am socialist. I do not know whether I will find companions."⁵⁹ Aron's ideas later evolved as he became one of the most vocal critics of communism in France, but it is fair to say that he remained true to his desire to maintain intellectual independence throughout his entire career. Even as late as 1956, at a key moment during

⁵⁵Ortega, *Toward a Philosophy of History*, 70; OC, 4:130.

⁵⁶Ortega, "No ser hombre de partido," in OC, 4:75.

⁵⁷Aron, "The Revolt of the Masses," 363.

⁵⁸Here is Aron's self-portrait: "Un sans parti, dont les opinions heurtent tout à tour les uns et les autres, d'autant plus insupportable qu'il se veut modéré avec excès, et qu'il dissimule ses passions sous des arguments" (Nicolas Baverez, *Raymond Aron* [Paris: Flammarion, 2005], 338; see also Aron, *Thinking Politically*, 301).

⁵⁹Aron, *Memoirs*, 71.

the Cold War, he admitted that to him “loyalty to one party has never been a decision of fundamental importance. ... I feel detached from the preferences or *Weltanschauung* of the left or the right, the socialists or radicals, the MRP or the independents. According to the circumstances, I am in agreement or disagreement with the action of a government or a given party.”⁶⁰

When considering Ortega’s and Aron’s desire to move beyond left and right politics and remain independent of party politics, it must be acknowledged that this was not an unusual trope in the 1920s and especially 1930s Europe. In *A Letter on Independence* (1935), for example, Jacques Maritain justified from a Catholic personalist perspective the need “to affirm ceaselessly the independence of the philosopher from whatever political parties there are.”⁶¹ In his view, this implied affirming and promoting the dignity of the human person, of the common good of the assembled multitude, and of moral and spiritual values. “To be neither of the Right nor of the Left then,” Maritain wrote, “signifies that one knows how to keep his reason.”⁶² Maritain was not alone in making this claim. Albeit from different perspectives, figures such as Ignazio Silone and George Orwell similarly articulated political visions which rejected firm commitments to both the left and right while supporting human dignity and pursuing the common good.⁶³ More radically, movements such as fascism and corporatism sought to move beyond a conception of politics framed around the traditional left/right dichotomy.⁶⁴ Consequently, it is necessary to draw a clear distinction between Ortega’s and Aron’s desire to eschew the categories of left and right in order to defend the values of liberal civilization, and those other political movements that challenged traditional left/right politics precisely in order to transcend those values and, sometimes, to destroy them.

Interwar Spain was an interesting case in point. Such a call to go beyond left and right came from the camp of José Antonio Primo de Rivera, who described his own pseudofascist movement, the Falange, launched in 1933, as follows: “The movement now founded is not a party, but a movement per se. —I could almost say an anti-party. It must be stated clearly once and for all that it belongs neither to the right nor the left.”⁶⁵ José Antonio’s movement and those which pursued similar agendas in neighboring France as well as throughout Europe were concerned with abolishing the established political order and were as profoundly hostile to the principles of liberal,

⁶⁰Aron, “Fanaticism, Prudence, and Faith,” appendix to *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2001), 342.

⁶¹Jacques Maritain, “A Letter on Independence,” in *Integral Humanism, Freedom in the Modern World, and A Letter on Independence*, ed. Otto Bird (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 122.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 132.

⁶³See Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 101–35.

⁶⁴See Dobson, *An Introduction to the Politics and Philosophy of José Ortega y Gasset*, 100.

⁶⁵Quoted in *ibid.*

parliamentary democracy, which they considered to be obsolete and unreformable, as they were to communism.⁶⁶ With respect to the right, they objected to its intention to maintain an economic order that was inefficient and unjust. They criticized the left for its anarchic tendencies and obsession with a partisan (and ultimately inefficient) view of social justice. By repudiating a certain political culture associated with the eighteenth century and the French Revolution, movements like fascism and corporatism sought to lay the foundation of a “new” civilization, which individualist liberalism was allegedly unable to provide. They dreamt of a communal, anti-individualist civilization that alone would be capable of providing a natural framework for a harmonious, organic collectivity.⁶⁷ In this way, these movements aimed at creating a new political vocabulary and framework with strong illiberal undertones.

This was problematic for Ortega since, in his view, movements which desired to transcend left and right in order to create an entirely new form of politics manifested a pathological desire to simplify the social and political world. According to Ortega, “Man who is lost in complications aspires to save himself in simplicity — a universal return to nudity, a general call to rid oneself of, to retire from, to deny, all richness, complexity, and abundance. ... Life is perplexity; the more possibilities there are in it, the more perplexed, the more painfully perplexed, is man.”⁶⁸ In such a perplexing age, the worldviews of fascism and communism promised easy and straightforward panaceas that explained the world in simplistic terms accessible to the common man.

When Aron and Ortega rejected the left and the right, they did not wish to argue for a fictitious collective or corporatist solidarity, nor were they rejecting the principles of liberal parliamentarism. In fact, they wished to maintain and strengthen the liberal-democratic foundations of Europe, embracing the common life in all its complexity. Whereas fascists wished to transcend traditional politics and therefore rejected left and right, Aron and Ortega viewed the political with a skeptical and critical eye without seeking to abolish the two poles. As Ortega put it, “the ‘rights’ and ‘lefts’ ... are absurdities inappropriate to this critical moment of European destiny.”⁶⁹ In an illuminating essay, “*Democracia morbosa*” (1917), Ortega reacted to the increasing politicization of all spheres of life in modern society. Politics, he argued, important as it is for the alleviation of suffering and the creation of the conditions for a decent life, is not and should not be allowed to become a final value, obscuring other, more important things in life.⁷⁰

⁶⁶Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Left nor Right* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 15.

⁶⁷See *ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁸Ortega, *Man and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1958), 142; *OC*, 5:110.

⁶⁹Ortega, “Organización de la decencia nacional,” in *OC*, 11:272.

⁷⁰Ortega, “*Democracia morbosa*,” in *OC*, 2:136.

Both thinkers went on to confront those who believed that the left or the right possessed an absolute monopoly on knowledge and truth. What concerned Ortega was not so much the ideas captured by the terms “right” and “left” as the political fanaticism, factionalization, and balkanization associated with their fight for supremacy. In a characteristic turn of phrase, Ortega suggested that a person can and should hold a political view, but that the political view should not hold the person.⁷¹ Ortega was critical of the left, particularly of twentieth-century democracy, declaring that “that which we call democracy today is a degeneration of the heart.”⁷² What is less known is Ortega’s rejection of the right. He was no traditional conservative and saw those who clung to tradition qua tradition as akin to children who cling to their parents, never developing their own individuality.⁷³ Time and again, he argued for abandoning “old politics” in favor of politics suitable to the demands of the twentieth century.⁷⁴

Aron shared Ortega’s concerns and mounted a powerful challenge to the conventional left in *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955), one of his best-known (and most polemical) books, in which he criticized the three “myths” of the left: the myths of the revolution, of the proletariat, and of progress. He took to task those on the left who saw their values and principles as the only acceptable ways in which one may view the political world. In “Fanaticism, Prudence, and Faith,” the essay published as his response to critics of his 1955 book, Aron’s target was what he called “doctrinairism,” that is, the tendency to attribute universal value to a particular doctrine, with one of its manifestations being the idea that the principles of the ideal order are identical only with a certain set of institutions.⁷⁵ Doctrinairism, Aron insisted, must be avoided primarily because it refuses to acknowledge and honor the complexity of the social and political world. After highlighting the tensions between the three ideas at the core of the left—liberty, organization, and equality—Aron pointed out that, while the left strives to free individuals from immediate servitude, it paradoxically ends up submitting them to other, more dangerous forms of servitude to the all-powerful state.⁷⁶ At the same time, another myth of the left “creates the illusion that the movement of history is a continual process of accumulating gains”⁷⁷ toward full social justice, full employment, and economic equality. Such goals, Aron argued,

⁷¹Ortega, “Maura o la política,” in *OC*, 11:71.

⁷²Ortega, “Democracia morbosa,” 138.

⁷³Ortega, “The Sunset of Revolution,” in *The Modern Theme* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), 106; *OC*, 3:212.

⁷⁴See, e.g., “Vieja y nueva política,” in *OC*, 1:265–99; “Sobre la vieja política,” in *OC*, 11:26–31.

⁷⁵See Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, 332–34.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 20.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 21.

may be reasonable in theory, but are often unattainable in practice; hence, to commit oneself blindly to them would be a serious form of self-deception.

A few years later, Aron turned his attention to the right, although his critique of the latter was not comparable in tone and sharpness to his account of the left. His essay "On the Right: Conservatism in Modern Societies," included in *Espoir et peur du siècle* (1957),⁷⁸ challenged an obsolete and retrograde form of conservatism, one out of sync with the legitimate demands for equality in modern democratic societies. In *Essais sur les libertés*,⁷⁹ Aron took to task the conception of freedom held by some of his colleagues on the right and highlighted the limitations of those approaches that posit a single definition of liberty, either freedom from constraint or freedom to participate in government. Thus his defense of liberty was somewhat different from that of other Cold War liberals such as Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Ludwig von Mises. In his review of Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty* (1961), while expressing his profound admiration for the Austrian economist, Aron articulated a different theory of freedom which took to task the identification of liberty *solely* with the preservation of the private sphere. "Even today," Aron wrote in that essay, "as much as it is legitimate to consider both respect for and the enlargement of this [private] sphere as one of the goals, eventually as the primordial goal, of the social order, it is also unacceptable to refer to this sole criterion in order to judge all actual societies."⁸⁰ In Aron's view, the approach equating liberty solely with obedience to laws had obvious merits but it should not be elevated to the rank of single criterion of truth when judging whether a society is free or not.

Liberty, Aron remarked, depends on the universality of the law, but it is also much more than absence of constraint. "All power involves some element of the government of men by men," he added; "liberty is not adequately defined by sole reference to the rule of law: the manner in which those who hold this power are chosen, as well as the way in which they exercise it, are felt, in our day, as integral parts of liberty."⁸¹ Liberty and power have a variable character which defines the historically shifting limits of the individual sphere that must be protected against the interference of the state. The upshot of this view is that there can be no objective, eternally valid definition of constraint, and consequently of liberty, since general rules too can sometimes be oppressive in one way or another. Aron believed that for all the brilliance of his analysis, Hayek neglected this point when drawing a stark distinction between obedience to persons (which he

⁷⁸On this text, see Mahoney, *Conservative Foundations*, 177–81.

⁷⁹See Aron, *Essais sur les libertés* (Paris: Hachette, 1998), 71–136.

⁸⁰Aron, "The Liberal Definition of Liberty: Concerning F. A. Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty*," in *In Defense of Liberal Reason*, ed. Daniel J. Mahoney (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), 89.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 85; see also 83. Also see Daniel J. Mahoney, *The Liberal Political Science of Raymond Aron* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992), 73–90.

equated with the absence of freedom) and submission to abstract and universal rules (which he equated with freedom). Aron believed that the nature of the checks on government and their effectiveness cannot be decided once forever in light of an allegedly immutable theory such as the rule of law, as Hayek claimed.⁸²

To conclude, many things triggered Ortega's and Aron's dissatisfaction with the use of the terms "left" and "right." A major reason for their desire to transcend these categories had to do with their recognition of the inevitable pluralism and complexity of social and political life, which, they believed, those fully aligned with the left or the right tended to ignore. Faced with the daunting task of understanding and interpreting the labyrinth of politics, people are often tempted to resort to the shortcuts provided by ideologies, which Ortega saw as falsifications of the truth or ill-conceived attempts to escape from the whirlpool of politics entirely.⁸³ Both options are questionable if not altogether wrong. As Ortega put it, "life obliges us, whether we wish it or not, to act politically,"⁸⁴ and Aron wholeheartedly agreed with this point, even if he may have understood it differently. But if life obliged them to act politically, they both sought to avoid becoming party men. This may have to do with their desire to maintain their own independence of mind as much as with their belief that one needs multiple perspectives rather than one single perspective in order to understand the nature and logic of social and political phenomena.

“Critical spectatorship”

Ortega and Aron thus faced a very difficult task in an age of increasing polarization and intransigence: finding an effective way to act politically without

⁸²On Aron's political thought, see also Stephen Launay, *La pensée politique de Raymond Aron* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995); Brian Anderson, *Raymond Aron: The Recovery of the Political* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997); Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 137–82; Aurelian Craiutu, "Raymond Aron and the French Tradition of Political Moderation," in *French Liberalism: From Montesquieu to the Present Day*, eds. Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 271–90. Of special interest is the volume dedicated to Aron by *Commentaire*, the magazine he had founded several decades earlier. The special issue of *Commentaire*, nos. 28 and 29 (1985), contains many important articles on Aron written by those who knew him, among them Gaston Fessard, Stanley Hoffman, François Furet, Allan Bloom, and Pierre Hassner. Also worth consulting is "Raymond Aron and French Liberalism," special issue, *European Journal of Political Theory* 2, no. 4 (2003), which features several important essays on Aron.

⁸³Ortega, "No ser hombre de partido," in *OC*, 4:75–83.

⁸⁴Ortega, "Verdad y perspectiva," in *OC*, 2:15.

falling into the ideological dogmatism and moral hemiplegia they denounced. It is to this issue that we turn in the present section, in which we examine the metaphors that the two thinkers used to describe their public engagement: *el espectador* (Ortega) and *le spectateur engagé* (Aron).⁸⁵ Our argument is that in their writings we find two related forms of “critical spectatorship” and ways of thinking about the relationship between observing and acting.

Ortega began developing his model of the spectator around 1916, when the first volume of his journal, tellingly entitled *El Espectador*, appeared. The journal would be published intermittently until its eighth volume in 1934. It was meant to be something of a public-intellectual journal, where Ortega could address different subjects, providing a more sophisticated outlet for his thoughts than he had found to that point. *El Espectador* gave voice to many ideas and several texts which he developed later.⁸⁶ With his new journal, Ortega hoped to identify and speak to those in Spain who shared his desire for the pursuit of truth, reflecting on a variety of subjects, especially literature, art, and culture, while responding to critics and distancing himself from various political groups.

On the surface, one might question whether *El Espectador* would be the best source for analyzing Ortega’s political engagement. Although political questions had always been important to Ortega, rarely were they the primary focus of his essays in this magazine. One thing, however, stands out in this regard. Despite his assertion that Spanish life necessitated political engagement,⁸⁷ he quickly moved to distance himself and *El Espectador* from conventional party politics. In Ortega’s view, “politics” often has the unfortunate tendency to be mere policy—that is, subjecting truth to utilitarian thinking and interest-based calculations. To “think utilitarian” amounts to subjecting truth to a technocratic means-ends discussion equating the truth with the useful. This, Ortega asserted, was the very “definition of lying,” suggesting that “the empire of politics is the empire of the lie.”⁸⁸ Accordingly, Ortega stated that *El Espectador* had one primary vision: “To raise a stronghold against politics” for those who shared his “desire for pure vision and pure theory.”⁸⁹

Over the following years, readers of Ortega would become familiar with such claims. In his prologue to the French edition of *The Revolt of the*

⁸⁵Because it retains the original term (“spectator”), we prefer to use the literal translation “committed spectator” (instead of “committed observer”) for Aron’s *spectateur engagé*.

⁸⁶Among the notable essays in *El Espectador* are “Nada ‘moderno’ y ‘muy siglo XX’” (vol. 1), “Notas de vago estío” (vol. 5), and “Meditación del Escorial” (vol. 6).

⁸⁷Ortega, “Verdad y Perspectiva,” 15.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 16. Aron, however, would not endorse such a radical view.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 17.

Masses, Ortega insisted that “neither this essay nor I are engaged in politics.”⁹⁰ But we should take such a claim with a grain of salt. Whatever Ortega’s desire to escape the sophistry of everyday politics, his philosophy was inescapably *political*. As an intellectual, he set out to create in Spain the social and political conditions that would allow philosophy to be “possible and actual.”⁹¹ Although Ortega’s writings are often roughly categorized as either philosophical or social-political, “their fundamental interdependence belies any meaningful distinction.”⁹² Later in his life, Ortega reaffirmed the connections between philosophy and practice, stating that “there is... no authentic action if there is no thought, and there is no authentic thought if it is not duly referred to action and made virile by its relation to action.”⁹³ Ortega himself put this creed into practice, particularly during the years of Spain’s transition from military dictatorship to republic, when he fervently hoped that he would be called upon to help shape Spain’s political future, running for and winning a seat in the Cortes, Spain’s parliamentary body, in 1931.⁹⁴

To the first two volumes of *El Espectador* (1916, 1917), Ortega contributed essays explaining how a critical and independent spectator would view the relationship between philosophy and practice in a section entitled “Confesiones de *El Espectador*.” This was the disposition of the journal itself and stands as a definitive statement of how Ortega believed an intellectual ought to engage in public life. In Ortega’s view, the task of *El Espectador* was to carve out a space for independent reflection in an age of impassioned politics and to provide respite to those weary of ideologically driven discourses and who sought to preserve their intellectual independence. As such, *El Espectador* was supposed to represent a rejection of “bad” politics, i.e., ideological politics, and it constituted a model for a more effective intellectual engagement with the political world.

It was clear that political concerns loomed large in the background and their persistence gave a particular tone and color to Ortega’s social and political criticism. The critical spectator that Ortega called for was someone who is (and acts like) a “friend of watching.”⁹⁵ By this he meant that a critical spectator would be interested in all that comes before him, sifting through all evidence at his disposal to develop an adequate understanding of the surrounding reality and becoming acquainted with a variety of perspectives

⁹⁰Ortega, *Toward a Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 70; OC, 4:130.

⁹¹Julián Marías, *History of Philosophy*, trans. Stanley Appelbaum and Clarence C. Strowbridge (New York: Dover, 1967), 444.

⁹²Victor Ouimette, *José Ortega y Gasset* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 62.

⁹³Ortega, “The Self and the Other,” in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 195; OC, 5:308.

⁹⁴Rockwell Gray, *The Imperative of Modernity: An Intellectual Biography of José Ortega y Gasset* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 215, 223.

⁹⁵Ortega borrows the phrase *amigos de mirar* from Plato, *Republic* 476b.

on life. Each perspective reflects (only) a part of the truth and a true knowledge of reality implies the slow acquisition of many partial truths.⁹⁶ In other words, true knowledge is familiarity with the multiple perspectives that life affords us, and truth is only obtained by corroborating what we see with what others perceive.⁹⁷ Ortega promised that *El Espectador* “will look at the panorama of life from its heart, from a promontory,”⁹⁸ thus providing access to a multitude of perspectives. Not surprisingly, he saw his task as being “in a certain sense opposed to that of the politician, the [intellectual] aiming, often in vain, to clarify things a little whereas the politician usually adds to the confusion.”⁹⁹

Hence, Ortega’s critical spectator would try to observe and interpret all that comes under his eyes, but he would do it with an open mind, without endorsing any preexisting ideological lenses or presuppositions. While assuming that arguments from both left and right may reflect a part of the truth, Ortega’s ideal critical spectator would never blindly follow either side out of ideological conformism. The problem with fully placing oneself on either side, Ortega noted, is that, in so doing, one effectively closes off the “the circle of political experiences” which one might otherwise have access to.¹⁰⁰ This becomes then a form of self-delusion distorting political judgment.¹⁰¹ Without the benefit of multiple perspectives, one is left without a strong basis to judge the veracity of political claims. Those who embrace total systems claiming to be in possession of universal truths often end up misunderstanding the nature of society and politics.

This critical spectatorial disposition towards politics reflects Ortega’s epistemological perspectivism. Influenced by Nietzsche, Ortega chose this term to describe his own epistemology, particularly from 1912 to 1923 when he developed his theory of the “spectator.”¹⁰² “Perspective,” he wrote in 1923, “is one of the components of reality,”¹⁰³ meaning that reality is simultaneously objective and constituted by the observer. If there is an objective reality, the latter is at the same time mediated through the perspective of each of its viewers. Each individual perspective offers a valuable but limited window into the heart of reality. The upshot is that no singular perspective can accurately account for the entire social and political reality: “There is no sense in any people or epoch setting up in opposition to the rest, as if their particular share of truth were the repository of the whole of it.”¹⁰⁴ False perspective, Ortega writes, “is that

⁹⁶See Ortega, *The Modern Theme*, 87; OC, 3:197

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 95; OC, 3:202.

⁹⁸Ortega, “Verdad y perspectiva,” 20.

⁹⁹Ortega, *Toward a Philosophy of History*, 70; OC, 4:130.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 71; OC, 4:130.

¹⁰¹Ortega, “Para la cultura del amor,” in OC, 2:144.

¹⁰²See John T. Graham, *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Life in Ortega y Gasset* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 187–228; Dobson, *An Introduction*, 144–62.

¹⁰³Ortega, *The Modern Theme*, 90; OC, 3:199.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 89; OC, 3:199.

which claims to be the only one there is. In other words, that which is false is utopia, non-localised truth, which 'cannot be seen from any particular place.'¹⁰⁵ The way to avoid this danger is to refuse any form of ideological blinders and admit that other individual perspectives may contain kernels of truth that need to be heard and acknowledged.

Aron echoed Ortega's perspectivism, even if he took it in a slightly different direction and gave it a more political dimension. "Plurality," he wrote in his *Memoirs*, "is immanent in the historical world. ... We do not grasp in a single perception a large whole, a global culture, or even a macro-event like the French Revolution. This plurality is bound up with the plurality of human nature itself, simultaneously life, consciousness, and idea, and with the fragmentary nature of determinism."¹⁰⁶ One must therefore study and consider a plurality of factors, motivations, and viewpoints when analyzing social and political phenomena. In Aron's view, it is essential to reveal the plurality of considerations on which political or economic action depends and it is important not to consider this plurality incoherent. In so doing, we must be aware of the inevitable conflict between ideas and principles such as economic growth, division of labor, economic productivity, equality, freedom, and justice. Rather than seek a fictitious harmonization between all these values and principles, responsible politicians must achieve a reconciliation or compromise between them and ought to be aware that any solution is at best only a temporary and unstable one.¹⁰⁷

Much as the "spectator" was for Ortega, the metaphor of the "committed spectator" was central to Aron's understanding of social criticism and political engagement.¹⁰⁸ In Aron's view, anyone writing on politics must always ask a fundamental (political) question: "What would I do if I were in the place of the statesman?" This is never an easy question, Aron added, and intellectuals are poorly equipped and prepared to answer it. They prefer moral and ideological criticism to technical criticism and like to sketch out a blueprint of a radically different order against which existing institutions are often found to be flawed or morally unacceptable. "By technical criticism," Aron argued, "one puts oneself in the place of those who govern or administer, one suggests measures which might attenuate the evils one deplores, one accepts the inevitable constraints of political action."¹⁰⁹ In particular, Aron insisted in *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, intellectuals tend to refuse to think

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 92; OC, 3:200.

¹⁰⁶Aron, *Memoirs*, 85.

¹⁰⁷See, for example, Aron, "Fanaticism, Prudence, and Faith," 346.

¹⁰⁸*Le Spectateur engagé* was published in the United States as *Thinking Politically*; also see Baverez, *Raymond Aron*, 496–500. Another important text in which Aron discusses the relation between studying and observing political phenomena is "Max Weber and Modern Social Science," in *History, Truth and Liberty: Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 335–73.

¹⁰⁹Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, 210.

politically and “prefer ideology, that is, a rather literary image of a desirable society, rather than to study the functioning of a given economy, of a parliamentary system, and so forth.”¹¹⁰ This being so, many of their opinions are based on emotions and vague moral imperatives rather than on careful consideration of facts in all their complexity.

Aron’s “committed spectator” proceeds differently. In an Aristotelian vein, he insists that it is vitally important that one always start from what *is* rather than what *ought* to be. Starting from what is means taking popular beliefs, opinions, and conventions seriously; trying to understand the historical and political contexts in which people make concrete choices; attempting to grasp the motivations of these choices and the diversity of existing political regimes, mores, customs, traditions, and habits of the heart. The Aronian social critic does not form his own opinions based on emotions and moral imperatives. Instead, he pays attention not only to structural factors that define the realm of the possible, but also to contingency, political leadership, the winds of fortune, and the paradoxes of human nature. He believes that when it comes to analyzing political phenomena, one must divest oneself of any sentimentality and should strive to be as lucid and responsible as possible.¹¹¹ His goal is to maximize the presence of reason and moderation in a world fraught with uncertainty and in constant flux. When the danger of anarchy looms large, he does everything in his power to avoid the worst and seeks to keep the ship of state on an even keel. Moreover, the committed spectator does not deduce the desirable solutions from a body of first principles laid down once and forever. Sound political judgment requires the capacity to understand the unique nature of political phenomena and actors’ intentions. He understands that it would be a great error to speak of political things absolutely and indiscriminately and to deal with them, as it were, in an abstract manner because every tiny difference in each case always has significant, large-scale effects. To discern these small differences requires a perspicacious eye and sound discernment.¹¹²

Aron’s analyses of the major political events of his time and his public pronouncements reflected these ideas. As a critical spectator, he analyzed each situation with a mixture of attachment and detachment, reason and passion, attentive to the particulars of each political situation. He was aware of his own fallibility and limited knowledge and considered himself a well-informed amateur who did not feel obliged to tell others what they should think or do. As an editorialist for *Le Figaro* and *L’Express*, he believed that a well-informed journalist must not seek to indoctrinate his readers but

¹¹⁰Aron, *Thinking Politically*, 154.

¹¹¹For more details, see *ibid.*, 262.

¹¹²See *ibid.*, 74; see also Aurelian Craiutu, “Faces of Moderation: Raymond Aron’s Committed Observer,” in *Political Reason in an Age of Ideology*, ed. Daniel J. Mahoney and Brian Paul Frost (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2007), 261–83.

ought to give them at least the basic facts that ministers should also use in making their decisions. When appropriate, he shared with his readers his own beliefs, but he did it with his characteristic “icy clarity”¹¹³ and, as it were, detached attachment.

Aron, who embraced “antinomic prudence,”¹¹⁴ opposed those who claimed to have a clear and infallible knowledge of the future and saw themselves as confidants of Providence. He refused the posture of a seer or prophet and tried to remain as close as possible to the facts themselves. At the same time, he did not seek refuge in the comfort of an imaginary perfect society and accepted that the relationship between politics and morality could not be properly explored by borrowing and rigidly applying concepts from morality or religion. Aron famously insisted that “politics is never a conflict between good and evil, but always a choice between the preferable and the detestable.”¹¹⁵ He called for moderation, prudence, reasonableness, and responsibility because, as he so well put it, “in political affairs, it is impossible to demonstrate truth, but one can try, on the basis of what one knows, to make sensible decisions.”¹¹⁶ No choice, Aron believed, is clear, perfect, or cost free, and every decision requires careful pragmatic thinking and evaluation of alternative paths. “Whether he meditates on the world or engages in action,” Aron argued, “the philosopher fulfills his calling inside and outside the polity, sharing the risks but not the illusions of his chosen party.”¹¹⁷ As he wrote elsewhere, political thought can be neither fully detached from nor a slave to reality; “raw observation is hardly instructive and utopia of little use in practice.”¹¹⁸ One can no more determine what *should* be solely on the basis of what *is* than one can limit one’s perspective to the examination of “pure” or mere facts. The latter are always influenced by our value judgments which, in turn, are defined largely by our environment. All situations always allow for a margin of choice and creative political decisions, but this margin, Aron insisted, is never unlimited and political decisions must be based on (and limited by) facts and circumstances.

This being so, critical spectatorship is an attempt to point out possibilities and elucidate, from the study of past and present societies, the goals one can aspire to and the means most likely to reach them. Such an endeavor, Aron argued, is always bound to be influenced by prior preferences and desires, but the outcome of political analysis “is never a moral or political imperative but an indication of diverse possibilities (as to goals) and degrees of probabilities (as to means).”¹¹⁹ On this view, thinking politically amounts to,

¹¹³We borrow this phrase from Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility*.

¹¹⁴On this topic, see Anderson, *Raymond Aron*, 121–66.

¹¹⁵Aron, *Thinking Politically*, 242.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 264.

¹¹⁷Aron, “The Social Responsibility of the Philosopher,” in *Politics and History*, ed. Miriam Bernheim Conant (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1984), 259.

¹¹⁸Aron, “History and Politics,” in *Politics and History*, 237.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 238.

above all, reflecting on political actors and their decisions, trying to understand their constraints, aspirations, and mental horizons. At the same time, thinking politically does not limit itself to a mere analysis of facts; it also implies assessing priorities and possibilities and acknowledging the existence of both constant factors (regularities) and unique situations and circumstances.

For a Civil Politics

Finding himself constrained by the traditions of a “backward” country, Ortega wrote in 1913 that “when it is not possible to do anything, the most one can do is criticize, analyze what others do.” As such was the case, “patriotism had to take the form of criticism of the national past.”¹²⁰ Ortega’s form of social criticism was predicated upon his belief that his task was to lay the groundwork for a revitalized Spain, and ultimately to move beyond detached criticism. From the moment he entered the Spanish consciousness, Ortega played the role of an intellectual gadfly dedicated to transforming Spain politically, socially, and culturally, in order to bring it into the new age. Through his extensive contributions to Spanish newspapers and journals, as well as in enthralling lectures as professor of philosophy at the University of Madrid, Ortega became Spain’s most important intellectual figure of the twentieth century.

Although Aron’s intellectual trajectory was different, he, too, was a remarkable political educator.¹²¹ In his *Memoirs*, he modestly described himself as “an analyst and a critic”¹²² and made a distinction between critics and creators who could exercise significant influence on their contemporaries. While many of the contributions of the “critics” are ephemeral pieces because they are tied to an ephemeral situation, the true creators, “at the risk of error, construct cathedrals of concepts with the courage of imagination.” With the benefit of hindsight, it is fair to say that Aron was overly modest when making this distinction and placing himself only in the category of critics.

In some ways, intellectual life no longer appears as charged with significance and fraught with as much danger as it did during the interwar period or the Cold War. Europeans finally live at peace with one another and the intensity of past ideological battles seems unreal to younger generations. But although the political climate has cooled to a significant extent, the critical spectatorial approach to politics proposed by Aron and Ortega can still serve as a model for those interested in social and political criticism.

¹²⁰Ortega, “Competencia,” in *OC*, 10:227.

¹²¹For an excellent intellectual portrait of Aron, see Pierre Manent’s essay “Raymond Aron—Political Educator,” in Aron, *In Defense of Liberal Reason*, 1–23.

¹²²Aron, *Memoirs*, 456.

For one thing, critical spectatorship as theorized and practiced by the two figures discussed in our essay bridges the two extremes of social criticism identified by Michael Walzer in *Interpretation and Social Criticism*: undercommitment (in the form of a philosophical detachment from society) and overcommitment (in the form of ideological partisanship).¹²³ The trajectories of Ortega and Aron show that exemplary social critics are never blindly committed to a set of ideas or principles (in the sense that they are never “held” by them) nor are they fully detached from their societies. While living by the standards of their age, they question them and stand up to the hypocrisy of political leaders or the moral dogmatism of their fellow citizens. In so doing, they do not step back and look at their own society with the eyes of an impartial outsider, but are instead prepared to view their society from different perspectives and fight for the principles which they deem essential to a free and open society.

Both thinkers transcend the common preoccupation with commitment as an end in itself and show a dignified way of remaining independent and committed at the same time. In so doing, they also offer a lesson in civility, demonstrating that the latter does not necessarily involve the elimination or absence of disagreement. It merely means the willingness to “stay present”¹²⁴ and keep the debate open even with those who profoundly disagree with us. The greatest source of incivility, both Ortega and Aron suggested, is the assumption that political affairs can be best dealt with from the standpoint of a comprehensive set of beliefs which must override any other considerations. Ortega’s and Aron’s form of critical spectatorship challenges this claim because, in their view, such an assumption is a recipe for political irresponsibility. To be a critical spectator means, for them, to strive for intellectual balance, critical reflection, discernment; this, in turn, implies the rejection of all simplifications, all types of Manichaeism and partiality.¹²⁵

Next, what makes Ortega and Aron original and differentiates them from other social critics is the fact that, while distrusting conventional political labels, they did not shy away from endorsing a *combative* political agenda.¹²⁶ They defended a society which, rather than merely pursuing the

¹²³See Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); and Mahoney, *Conservative Foundations*, 183.

¹²⁴We borrow this phrase from Jeremy Waldron, “Civility and Formality,” in *Civility, Legality, and Justice in America*, ed. Austin Sarat (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 59.

¹²⁵Compare with Norberto Bobbio, *A Political Life*, ed. Alberto Papuzzi (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 123.

¹²⁶Jeffrey Green has recently suggested that spectatorship can be part of “ocular democracy,” providing a disciplining gaze upon the rulers; see Jeffrey Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Our opinion is that spectatorship can be part of a more *active* model of social criticism as illustrated by Ortega and Aron.

bottom line of protecting individual freedom from state interference, also focused on the fundamental political task of enabling people to live together as free and equal citizens committed to a notion of the common good (broadly defined).¹²⁷ The political style espoused by Ortega and Aron appears as the “supreme form of generosity” (and civility) which affirms its “determination to share existence with the enemy; more than that, with an enemy which is weak.”¹²⁸ It demonstrates the “willingness to think that one’s theories about the world might be wrong or incomplete”¹²⁹ and makes a plea for a form of “magnanimous politics,”¹³⁰ while opposing the tendency to devote “oneself to feverish affirmation of one’s corner.”¹³¹ They employed a method of reasoning that weighs the pros and cons of each situation or proposal, without closing off all space for others’ positions, and without making it impossible for them to respond with their own arguments.

One final objection to our argument must be considered here. One might wonder if many of Ortega’s and Aron’s concerns with mass society and totalitarianism may not be outdated and obsolete today. If so, what might be the contemporary relevance of a model of critical spectatorship that was designed in response to such threats? The answer we have proposed in this essay is a straightforward one. Both Ortega and Aron show us how to maintain one’s independence while fighting for the values of liberal civilization and practicing a distinctive form of social and political criticism that does not interpret the world through ideological lenses. If Aron, for example, was a staunch critic of Stalinism and the myths of the left, he was never self-righteous or uncritical toward the Western societies of his time or toward his colleagues on the right. Nor was he dogmatic in his pointed critique of Sartre or his detailed analyses of Marx. Both Ortega and Aron cared about political justice, but they could never repeat with Emmanuel Mounier (and other fellow-travelers) that “political justice is only possible in an affirmation of a final goal of history.”¹³² Such a link with an illusory end of history could open the way to violence and legitimize terror.

It is worth repeating that Ortega and Aron shared a distinctively *political* sensibility that made them understand the complexity and fragility of Western liberal civilization. They insisted that in order for the latter to survive, one must be prepared to fight for it and should nurture those virtues that are necessary for winning this epic battle. Civic-mindedness and commitment to freedom and pluralism are some of those indispensable virtues. Another was the absence of dogmatism and ideological

¹²⁷Ortega, *Toward a Philosophy of History*, 64–65; *OC*, 4:126.

¹²⁸Ortega, *The Revolt of the Masses*, 76; *OC*, 4:192.

¹²⁹Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, xviii.

¹³⁰Dobson, *An Introduction*, 59; see also Ortega, “Sencillas reflexiones,” in *OC*, 10:169.

¹³¹Ortega, *Man and Crisis*, 145; *OC*, 5:112.

¹³²Mounier as quoted in Judt, *Past Imperfect*, 121.

intransigence. The remarkable thing about Ortega and Aron is that, although fully engaged in the fight to save liberal Western civilization, neither of them could be caged into a particular system, doctrine, or ideology; they held political beliefs but did not allow their beliefs to “hold” them. Their social and political criticism rejects the assumption that one can achieve a certain degree of consistency only by subscribing to or endorsing a particular doctrine or creed. Aron’s anticommunism, for example, may not have endeared him to his colleagues on the left, but even they, walled up in their own black-and-white conceptions of politics, had to recognize in the end his profound decency and generosity manifested by his propensity to dialogue and his commitment to civility. Both thinkers approached their subjects with the philosopher’s seriousness, the ordinary citizen’s concern for the common good, and the critical spectator’s partial detachment shorn of ideological intransigence. This unusual mix remains a model that can still inspire us today.

The mere fact that neither Ortega nor Aron explicitly developed their theories of “critical spectatorship” into a full-fledged doctrine of political action was not an accident.¹³³ Such declarations of how one ought to act in the public sphere or in the political world would have been inconsistent with their broader thinking, as they often went out of their way *not* to tell us how to act. They did not wish to impose opinions on anyone; on the contrary, they aspired to motivate others to remain faithful to their own perspectives on the condition that they were examined with a critical eye.¹³⁴ Consequently, rather than telling others exactly how to act, Ortega and Aron sought instead to “sharpen sensibilities,”¹³⁵ prompting them to search for solutions and answers on their own. Rather than providing us with a road map, they help reflect upon previous political experiences while giving a general sense of how to move forward and what to avoid in the future. As critical spectators and political educators, their goal was to provide their contemporaries with “essays of serenity in the middle of the storm.”¹³⁶ In our own post-modern age of anxiety, such an agenda remains as relevant and important as ever before.

¹³³It might be argued—though we would like to leave this question open—that of the two authors, Aron saw better and farther because he may have had a superior understanding of the movement from spectatorship to action.

¹³⁴See Ortega, “Verdad y Perspectiva,” 20.

¹³⁵We borrow the phrase from Jan-Werner Müller, “Fear and Freedom: On ‘Cold War Liberalism,’” *European Journal of Political Theory* 7, no. 1 (2008): 59.

¹³⁶Ortega, *Prólogo para Franceses*, in *OC*, 4:139.