



Aron, Jean-Paul (1925-1988)

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French writer and public intellectual Jean-Paul Aron is widely credited for giving a human face to AIDS and thereby changing the public perception of the disease and those who suffered from it. A rival of philosopher Michel Foucault, who also died of AIDS, Aron contrasted his openness about his diagnosis with Foucault's secretiveness.

Born in Strasbourg on May 27, 1925 into a Jewish family that had produced many doctors and scientists over the years, Aron studied philosophy and psychology before embarking on a career as a teacher and researcher, first at a secondary school, then at the University of Lille, and finally at the prestigious École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences) in Paris.

Aron published several historical works examining middle-class social practices and the formation of bourgeois consciousness and ideology in nineteenth-century France. The most important of these, *Le Pénis et le démoralisation de l'Occident* (The Penis and the Demoralization of the West) (1978), co-written with Roger Kempf, studied the emergence of repressive middle-class attitudes toward masturbation and homosexuality.

In *Les Modernes* (The Moderns) (1984), Aron attacked contemporary French intellectual trends for being too abstract and ignoring "real life experience and common sense."

Aron also produced two novels, several plays, and many newspaper and magazine articles. He frequently appeared in television broadcasts, becoming a noted figure on the French intellectual scene. Always discreet about his homosexuality, he nonetheless started to take part in demonstrations for gay rights in the early 1980s.

Aron began feeling unwell in late 1985 and in January 1986 his brother (a doctor) informed him that he was seropositive. Two years later, in the autumn of 1988, Aron became the first well-known personality in France to break the silence (and shame) that still surrounded AIDS by giving an interview to a weekly magazine, *Le Nouvel Observateur*. The periodical put Aron on its cover and titled the interview "My AIDS."

In this interview, Aron spoke candidly about his private life, his daily struggle with AIDS, and his "serenity" in the face of impending death. "It was probably crazy, maybe dishonest," Aron confessed, "but I never felt homosexual. The disease alone forces me to admit that I belong existentially and socially to that category. I denied my specific nature, not because I was ashamed of it, but because I never had any desire to be 'one of them'. There was in me a reluctance to be part of that community because I didn't have the vocation for it."

Aron also used the interview as an opportunity to take a swipe at his former friend Michel Foucault, one of the dominant thinkers in France in the 1970s and 1980s. Foucault had died of AIDS in June 1984, but kept his illness a secret even beyond the grave. Aron considered Foucault a rival and had attacked him in *Les Modernes* both from "philosophical allergy" (i.e., a deeply felt antipathy to his ideas), but also, he finally

admitted, for another "half illegitimate" reason: "I was jealous of his glory."

In the interview, Aron declared: "Foucault was the man of language, knowledge and truth He was also homosexual. He was ashamed of it, even while living it sometimes in a reckless way. I disagreed with his silence in the face of disease because it was a silence of shame It was so contrary to everything that he had always believed in!"

The sociologist Daniel Defert, Foucault's partner, replied with dignity that "People handle their sickness and their death in the way they can. Jean-Paul Aron seems to be saying, 'I am speaking out because Foucault did not dare to speak.' I shared twenty-three years with Foucault's life and moral choices, and if we had been ashamed homosexuals, as Aron suggests, I would never have founded the association Aides [which fights against the spread of AIDS]."

Aron's openness about his health problems (in addition to the published interview, he gave a televised interview in June 1988) made him into an instant celebrity in France. "I've been writing and teaching for thirty years," he told a friend, "and, lo and behold, twenty-five pages make me famous."

Upon his death on August 20, 1988, the press saluted Aron for his courage and credited him with changing the public perception of AIDS and of people living with AIDS. An editorialist for *Libération* observed that "he broke a tacit ban, giving the disease a face, a history, a sensibility. In short, humanizing the fear." According to *Le Nouvel Observateur*, which had first publicized Aron's story, "He will always remain 'the one who dared'."

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Michael D. Sibal is Associate Professor of History at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He specializes in the history of modern France and has published articles and essays on the Napoleonic police state (1799-1815), the nineteenth-century French labor movement, and French homosexuality. He has co-edited, with Jeffrey Merrick, *Homosexuality in French History and Culture* (2002) and is currently writing a history of the gay male community of Paris since 1700.