The Virtues of Faction: Aristotle on the Politics of Comradeship

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Scholars from a diverse range of political and philosophic perspectives have turned to Aristotle as a resource for conceptualizing the conditions of civic membership, treating him as bulwark against the dangers of a fragmented moral tradition (MacIntyre 1981), a diagnostician of the institutional prerequisites for actualizing the capacities of all (Nussbaum 1990), and as a corrective to contemporary liberalism’s aversion to questions of the good (Salkever 1990). A number of scholars have found Aristotle’s account of political friendship to be particularly helpful for addressing the exercise of political power under conditions of plurality and contestation. By contrast, “the revolutionary term of address, ‘comrade,’” *hetairos*, is seen as a threat to the stability of the polis (Yack 1993, 121-122), and as a factional mode of discord to which political friendship provides a “remedy” (Frank 2005, 148). In conversation with contemporary accounts of radical, partisan political action offered by Jodi Dean (2016), Jacques Rancière (2010), and Kathi Weeks (2011), this paper returns to Aristotle on comradeship to conceptualize the demands and possibilities of civic membership when the conditions for political friendship are under threat, as they are, in particular, under tyrannical rule.

Focusing on Aristotle’s robust and undertheorized account of tyranny, I explore in part one of my paper how tyrants compromise citizens’ sense of shared advantage and cross-class concord by provoking factional conflict, even as they undermine institutions like political clubs, *hetareiai*, also translated as “factions” or “parties.” I argue that, under such conditions, when the central question for citizens becomes less how to exercise power in a just way than how to challenge its unjust exercise by a tyrant, comradeship, a highly partisan and deeply solidaristic mode of civic association and a vice under ordinary political circumstances, becomes a virtue. I

turn in part two of my paper to the political history of Athenian clubs and club-mates or comrades, *hetairoi*. Scholars often emphasize the dangers of “fragmentation and factionalism” these associations posed to Athenian democracy during the later years of the Peloponnesian War and after the war ended (Balot 2001, 177; Connor 1971). Taking those dangers into account, I also consider Aristotle’s insights, in the context of tyranny, into the tyrant’s fear of this institution and focus on that fear to illuminate the potentially salutary resources factions may offer to thwart tyranny. I argue that this tight-knit mode of political association allows citizens at odds with the rule to which they are subject to pursue shared, partisan goals in and outside of established channels of power and to form solidaristic trust. I make the case that the central task of comradeship is to provoke and develop desires for a just redistribution of power that challenges the monopoly of the tyrant. Drawing on Jessica Moss’s (2012) work on Aristotle’s account of perception, imagination, and desire, in part three, I analyze how comrades organize on behalf of their faction or party by making their insurgency aesthetically pleasing to a broader public. For Aristotle, all action stems from the perception of some apparent, phenomenal good. The task of provoking faction against tyranny thus requires developing the imagination of a political order for the sake of which first, comrades, and then, the people, might desire to organize and resist.

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