

CIVIC FRIENDSHIP AND THE THIRD TERM

Mark Vernon

Mark Vernon contrasts the Aristotelean conception of civic respect and virtues with what contemporary politicians seem to have in mind.

The matter of civic respect has barely left the headlines since the general election of 2005. And whilst some of the announcements and discussion since have bordered on the laughable, it is an issue that goes to the heart of what politics is about and aims to achieve. Indeed, no less a political theorist than Aristotle thought that the issue was central. Reflecting on what the philosopher of the Lyceum said 2,500 years ago reveals an uncanny relevance to the possibilities, and limits, of what might be done now.

For Aristotle, civic respect stems from what can be called civic friendship. People may, of course, show each other respect without any signs of friendliness: the wise general will do as much when staring at his enemy across the battlefield. Alternatively, deferential societies may demand another kind of respect: Machiavelli says that the prince must command the respect of his subjects, but he need not himself show any respect for his people. However, for respect to exist in an equal, 'post-deferential' society not at war with itself, it must arise from a mutual sense of shared civic friendship.

Thus a proper sense of civic friendship is prior to a proper sense of civic respect. So, what does Aristotle have to say about it? Most of his discussion of it comes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the prolegomenon to his *Politics*. He holds that friendship is foundational to community — something that is natural to assume because friendship is the best reason that people have for wanting to live together — for a number of reasons. For example, he says, friendship holds states together, it being the opposite of enmity: thus, lawmakers should have a high regard for the way legislation either underpins or undermines friendship since friendship is much more effective at sustaining society than the blunt tools of justice. Alternatively, civic friend-

ship is vital for any social group to have a common purpose: the point here is that when acting out of motives of friendship people do not do so in wholly selfish ways but with at least a degree of altruism too.

However, perhaps the fundamental reason that civic friendship is so important is that, for Aristotle, the state should exist not only so that people might live, but that they might live well. In other words, when Aristotle described human beings as political animals, he did not mean to say that everyone is at heart selfish and scheming. Rather, he was expressing quite the opposite; the belief that human beings live together in the polis not so they can merely subsist — sharing basics such as food, shelter and safety — but that they might live humanly rich lives. Civic friendship is, therefore, manifest in the collective desire of the citizenry that everyone should be able to enjoy life in all its fullness. (Incidentally, this also suggests how civic friendship differs from personal friendship: they differ because citizens will not know each other equally well, as friends do; but both personal and civic friendship are rightly referred to as types of friendship since both entail a sense of goodwill and affection for others, if with varying intensities.)

Now, friendship cannot be imposed, on an individual or a society; politicians and political theorists alike would be wasting their time if they were to attempt to devise a programme to promote civic friendship, let alone write it into the Queen's speech. Rather, it grows out of a good society (or to put it another way, the state is not a collective noun for friends, even an ideal state). Therefore, what Aristotle commends is a politics that creates the best conditions for civic friendship to flourish. He identifies a number of factors as important.

First, civic friendship flourishes best in an equal society. By this Aristotle does not mean a society of economic equality. The equality he advocates is one that aligns wealth and responsibility. For example, if someone is rich, then they bear a responsibility to care for those who are poor. This promotes amity in the community and counters enmity. We can call this first condition that of geometric equality (to distinguish it from an arithmetic sense of economic equality).

Secondly, civic friendship flourishes in a politically engaged society. The point here is again rather practical. Simply put, if citizens do not engage in civic activities as an expression of their mutual concern for others, then the friendship they have will only serve personal not collective ends; without a healthy civic society, there will be no civic friendship. This condition can be called the condition of civic engagement.

The third condition stems from the link between civic friendship and personal friendships. In short, Aristotle implies that the former grows out of the latter. His vision of society is one of increasing circles of intimacy and acquaintance, starting with households and various kinds of fraternities, and ultimately embracing the community as a whole. So, intimate friendships provide the impetus for the less intense kinds, and the implication is that if citizens are bereft of a keen sense of personal belonging, society will exhibit little or no civic friendship too. Call this the condition of connection.

Fourthly, civic friendship depends not only citizens wanting to live, but on citizens wanting to live well. This point has made above and it can be deepened by pointing to the distinction between the two Greek words for life. One is *zoe*; it derives from the verb to exist. The other is *bios*; it derives from the verb to live a way of life. A society that mostly promotes *zoe* will not be much concerned with civic friendship but rather with the economics of existence. Conversely, a developed politics of *bios*, one aimed at wellbeing as much as welfare — leading to a society in which people ‘have a life’, we might say — is critical for civic friendship. So fourthly, this is the condition of wellbeing.

This identifies some conditions for civic friendship and thus civic respect, at least according to Aristotle. And we can apply them to the present situation via a kind of test: by asking how well our society promotes the conditions for civic friendship, we can discern something of how well our society can hope to nurture civic respect (and, moreover, something of the task Blair has set himself for the third term).

First, consider the condition of geometric equality. Aristotle’s discussion implies that a respect-promoting society is a society

in which everybody feels the benefits of living in it. This might be interpreted as operating, say, a policy of redistributive taxation. Under this criterion we do pretty well and certainly better than ancient Athens. However, the condition contains another aspect too: the responsibility that the richer must feel for the poorer. In other words, imposed taxation may bring material goods to many, but it will not of itself promote civic friendship, nor respect. Further, geometric equality is upset by ever widening gaps between the rich and poor; that leads to a state of envy not amity.

Second, consider the condition of civic engagement. At one level, it is clear that there is such a thing as civic society and, indeed, civic friendliness in today's world. One only needs to think of the wide variety of charities and NGOs that are concerned with the quality of people's lives. They work, in part, by promoting networks of concerned individuals in business, government and other organisations like the church. However, at another level, one can clearly question the extent to which modern democracy represents a healthy civic society. One need only point to the political disengagement represented by the low turnout in elections or, conversely, what Julia Middleton, the founder of *OpenGround*, an organisation that seeks to nourish civil society, has called the fetishization of the vote — as if the extent of one's civic engagement is measured solely by whether one does indeed vote.

Third, is the condition of connection. Again, this is a massive issue. However, the point I want to touch on is not perhaps one of the obvious, like rising divorce rates or increasing physical mobility and their implications for social alienation. Rather, it is to raise a concern about the nature of the modern family. The problem is that the family has come to be thought of as a wholly private entity, and that there should be a radical separation between that privacy and the external world. Indeed, so insular has the idea of family become that even friendship can be perceived as a threat to it. For example, during the Civil Partnership debate, any reference to friendship had to be dropped to avoid igniting the touchpaper of the so-called pro-family lobby. Now, there may be good reasons for wanting

to maintain clear boundaries of privacy in today's world and perhaps even to fear 'tampering' with the institution of marriage by widening its definition. However, there are ramifications in doing so too — not least, I suggest, thwarting Aristotelian circles of intimacy and acquaintance that lead citizens to feel positively connected to the world around them, and thereby value civic friendship.

Finally, there is the matter of not only living, but living well. The problem here is that the modern economy's success in looking after citizens' welfare — that is, life in terms of staying well, staying alive, staying safe — tends to overlook, or sideline, the matter of wellbeing. In fact, possibilities for civic friendship in the fuller sense may find themselves positively squeezed out. On the one hand, the demands of the modern economy arguably leave less time for friends and civics, perhaps even promoting ways of life that can be positively inimical to them both (alternatively, one thinks of education policies focused on vocational not liberal qualifications; or health policies that cause doctors to have only enough time to prescribe pills, not sit with people). On the other hand, although our contemporary cultural life can be rich, it often seems that it falls short of the aspirations of the past. Simon Goldhill's *Love, Sex and Tragedy* amply demonstrates the 'poverty of cultural ambition' today when set alongside the Great Dionysia of ancient Athens. This enabled and fostered participation and self-reflection on the personal, familial, intellectual and political issues of general concern. Where in the public life of Western society could we look for any such equivalent critical and emotional civic engagement?' — though it is hardly surprising that a political culture dominated by management and the market is so lacking.

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Tony Blair claims to have already done a lot for respect by increasing the numbers of police and using anti-social

behaviour orders. According to Aristotle this is to fall at the first hurdle: civic respect can no more imposed or policed than civic friendship. But if the Labour government is serious about respect, and thus about civic friendship, then the philosophy suggests it needs to commit itself to a wide variety of social and political issues, from closing the gap between rich and poor, and a widespread promotion of life-engaging culture, arts and sport, to ensuring that the economy works for individuals and society, not individuals and society for the economy. Now, that would be a radical political programme — perhaps too late for Blair but one to which his successor might warm.

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