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# La Stásis dans la politique d'Aristote: La cité sous tension. Les anciens et les modernes, 30

Esther Rogan, *La Stásis dans la politique d'Aristote: La cité sous tension. Les anciens et les modernes, 30*. Paris: Editions Classiques Garnier, 2018. 430. ISBN 9782406062257 €52,00 (pb).

## Review by

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In the introduction to her book-length study of Aristotle's concept of στάσις (variously translated in English as civil war, revolution, faction, unrest, but which I will leave untranslated), Esther Rogan writes that "En France, un travail exhaustif et systématique restait donc à accomplir sur la *stásis* chez Aristote, afin de prolonger et de faire se rejoindre les perspectives développées par Nicole Loraux et par Pierre Pellegrin, mais également afin d'inscrire les débats anglo-saxons dans le champ de la recherche française et, ainsi, prendre position dans ces discussions" (24). Rogan's book admirably accomplishes all those goals and much more. Although the book focuses on Aristotle's account of στάσις, her inquiry is wide ranging with substantive insights about both the methodology of interpreting ancient Greek political thought generally and more specifically Aristotle's political thought. The work engages so many different debates and such a broad range of Anglophone and Francophone scholarship that it should not be pigeonholed as "a book on στάσις"; rather, this is a substantive interpretation of Aristotle's political thought as a whole, albeit through the fascinating lens of political unrest.

Rogan explores the notion of στάσις in three different stages. In the first section of her book, "La *stásis*, réalité complexe et protéiforme," she explores the multiplicity of senses that the term στάσις possesses in Aristotle's writings. For instance, although στάσις can originate in the quality of vice within one's soul, it can also originate as a response to an affront. In the second section, "La *stásis* constitutive du politique humain," Rogan seeks a common principle by means of which to unify the diverse senses of the term found in *Politics* Book V; ultimately, she locates the unity of the phenomenon in the heterogeneity that Aristotle thinks constitutes a polis. Finally, in the third section, "Les excellences plurielles de la cité," Rogan examines how στάσις is offset by or is the antithesis to "le juste milieu" or μέσον. But her analysis of the middle constitution in *Politics* IV.11 also

shows that Aristotle considers stability as a fundamental criterion of constitutions, one which she uses to rethink the taxonomy of “right” and “deviant” constitutions found in *Politics* III.6. Let me expand further on each section.

The first section of the book comprises three chapters that together convey what Rogan calls “l’irréductible polysémie” of Aristotle’s account of στάσις. For instance, as Rogan shows quite persuasively, Aristotle can analyze στάσις as a function of an individual human’s character traits. For example, she provides an extended analysis of Aristotle’s analysis and criticisms of Phaleas’ constitution in *Politics* II.7, one that sought to eliminate στάσις through the equalization of property as a remedy for greed. But *Politics* V also includes numerous instances where στάσις results from “une inclination passagère,” namely when an individual or group reacts with στάσις to an affront or grievance that involves no vice or injustice on the part of the person or group aggrieved. Indeed, *Politics* V provides numerous lists of causes of στάσις—lists that are so multifold that commentators have struggled to find an underlying causal mechanism that can account for all forms of στάσις. Rogan, I think quite wisely, categorizes Aristotle’s different causal accounts of στάσις under six heads, each classified “à partir d’agent,” namely based on the category of the persons who initiate the στάσις. Thus, Rogan identifies six cases or categories of στάσις: (1) democrats against oligarchs, (2) oligarchs against democrats, (3) στάσις among notables within oligarchy, στάσις between heterogeneous elements (either (4) of ethnicity or (5) of territory) in a polis, and—most interestingly—(6) the case of στάσις initiated by “les honnêtes gens”, namely the decent or virtuous. A concluding “axiologie des séditions” maps out patterns of στάσις as an alternative to a single reductive causal explanation like economic class; and yet there are observable patterns in different kinds of stasis. Whereas Aristotle’s predecessors (e.g., Plato, Thucydides, or the tragedians) represented στάσις as unequivocally and uniformly a problem, Aristotle’s dynamic and multifaceted analysis is much more subtle and complicated in its estimation of blame.

If the first part of Rogan’s book brings out the multifaceted nature of στάσις, the second part of the book considers common principles that might unify such multiplicity. Rogan rejects both reductive ethical and economic principles to explain στάσις, largely because they fail to account for the plurality of forms of στάσις documented in the first part of the book. For instance, analyzing στάσις primarily in terms of ethical principles makes the στάσις of the notables or the decent utterly inexplicable. Rather, she claims that στάσις is integral to and constitutive of the polis as such insofar as Aristotle conceives of the polis as a heterogeneous plurality of different types of parts or roles within the polis. Thus, “vouloir penser une cité sans stásis reviendrait paradoxalement à annihiler la polis” (132). In the process of making sense of such a claim, Rogan offers extended reflection on the methodology of interpreting classical political thought. Rogan explores, for instance, her debt to the work of Bernard Yack, whose *Problems of a Political Animal* (1985) was fundamental in recognizing the importance of understanding difference and heterogeneity in Aristotle’s *Politics* (especially amidst the communitarian Aristotelians of the time). But Yack was less interested in the historical context of Aristotle’s work or its relationship to Aristotle’s predecessors and contemporaries, such as Thucydides and

Isocrates. Thus, Rogan also acknowledges her debt to the work of Nicole Loraux, who takes conceptualization and contextualization as “indissociables” in understanding the classical polis and its theorists. The result is that Rogan does the work of theorizing the polis in a way that is both theoretically rich and also historically contextualized, showing, e.g., how Aristotle’s account of a heterogeneous polis grows out of his criticisms of Plato and Socrates. Scholars interested not just in what Aristotle says but in how we go about theorizing what he says will find much to consider. I did have one minor source criticism: If Yack is insufficiently attentive to historical context and Loraux is less interested in Aristotle per se, a happy medium may be found in Arlene Saxonhouse’s discussion of Aristotle in *Fear of Diversity: The Birth of Political Science in Ancient Greek Thought* (1992), which also focuses upon the importance of heterogeneity in Aristotle’s political thought.

The claim that στάσις must be understood as a phenomenon integral to a heterogeneous polis results in a fascinating and very rich reflection on the nature of justice in Aristotle’s *Politics*, one of the best accounts I have read in any language. Familiar is the following tension: On the one hand, Aristotle’s ethical treatises and his account of regard for the common advantage as that which differentiates right and deviant regimes envision an abstract, external notion of ideal distribution. On the other hand, Books III and V of Aristotle’s *Politics* exhibit all the various heterogeneous parts of the polis—for example, the wealthy whose liturgies provide triremes to the city, the poor who row those triremes, the land-owning hoplites who fight in the city’s phalanx, and the decent or practically wise individuals who function as the city’s deliberative and judicial components—as making valid, albeit only partially valid claims for possession of power within the polis. Στάσις often originates when one of the heterogeneous parts absolutizes, as it were, its claim: the wealthy claim that only they should hold office; the poor claim that all native born citizens should hold office (and that the wealthy should subsidize such political participation). At first glance, the tension seems utterly irreconcilable. From the perspective of virtue, the discussion of the concept of justice in *Politics* III looks aporetic and irresolvable; from the perspective of the various necessary parts of the city, the ideal account of the virtue of justice looks irrelevant to allocating power within the polis. But on Rogan’s reading, since στάσις is analytically (if even only potentially) present in every heterogeneous polis as such, then στάσις should be thought of as “entre le juste et l’injuste,” rather than in opposition to justice (as Thucydides, Plato, and Isocrates theorize στάσις). No doubt, Aristotle retains an abstract or absolute notion of justice as proportional equality; but στάσις arises when partially just claims are over-extended. Rogan argues that στάσις should not be conceived in terms of selfish or egoistic interests, personal attacks, or even as revolution per se (although it can result in such political phenomena).

The third and final section of Rogan’s book reconceives the taxonomic normativity of Aristotle’s *Politics* through a detailed analysis of the so-called “middle constitution” and the place of stability as a criterion and basis for constitutional classification. In the former case: *Politics* IV.11 describes a broadly inclusive constitution in which people of moderate wealth outnumber both the rich and the poor (IV.11.1295b35-39). If a polis is

necessarily composed of heterogeneous parts, then “c’est en termes d’intégration, et non d’éradication ou d’exclusion de ces dernières, que l’ordre politique devra être pensé” (249). Unlike Aristotle’s aristocracy, the middle constitution does not disenfranchise the poor, but neither does it exclude or repossess the resources of the wealthy, as happens in a democracy. Rather, the middle constitution provides an optimum blend or integration of the various parts of the polis in such a way that it excludes *στάσις* and provides a pre-eminent example of stability. In the latter case: *Politics* III.6 famously establishes a six-fold taxonomy of constitutions in which right constitutions are “in accord with unqualified justice” (κατὰ τὸ ἀπλῶς δίκαιον [III.6, 1279a19]), namely are ruled in the interest of the ruled rather than in the interest of those ruling. But Aristotle characterizes the middle constitution in IV.11 as most free from faction and also the most stable constitution. How is the criterion of stability, something discussed in numerous places in books IV-VI of the *Politics*, related to the account of the common good and justice that appears to be the basis for Aristotle’s classification of constitutions in *Politics* III?

Rogan devotes two chapters to articulating the relationship between stability and the classification of regimes and a final chapter to considering the place (or lack thereof) of “political friendship” and “concord” in the *Politics*. Again, her responses to these questions are more nuanced and detailed than I can briefly summarize, insofar as they take up not only the problem of *στάσις*, but also the questions of different strata within the *Politics* and the reconciliation of justice and political stability, a timeless and thus timely question. Since aristocracy (a form of just constitution) is not especially stable and some forms of democracy (an unjust form of constitution) exhibit stability, Rogan ultimately concludes that “la perspective de la stabilité ( *mésos-stásis*) ne se substitue donc pas à celle de la finalité (juste-injuste) : elle permet seulement de penser que les rapports juste-injuste/stable-instable sont susceptibles de se croiser dans la pratique ou sur le plan des faits, bien que ces notions s’excluent en droit” (296). Nonetheless, Rogan devotes a chapter to examining how the different kinds of constitutions cluster together when stability is conjoined to (rather than replaces) justice.

Following a brief conclusion, Rogan’s book includes ten pages of appendices that map out the uses of the terms *στάσις* and its cognates not only in Aristotle’s writings but also in those of other major Greek authors, playwrights, and orators of the archaic and classical periods. Thereafter follows an over thirty-page bibliography, an *index nominum*, and an *index locorum*. I could count on one hand the number of typographical errors I located while reading the book. One normally balances a review with a couple of brief objections about how one might organize the book differently or about a certain line of interpretation within the text. But such objections would pale in comparison to what Rogan accomplishes, which truly is an exhaustive treatment of all of the different ways that *στάσις* is relevant to understanding Aristotle’s ethical and political works, both against the backdrop of his near-contemporaries like Plato, Thucydides, and Isocrates, but also against the backdrop of Rogan’s contemporaries, such as Loraux, Pellegrin, Yack, Polanski, Kalimtzis, Weed, and Skultety. Rogan has incorporated into her Francophone scholarly discussions of Aristotle’s *Politics* the work

of major Anglophone scholars (and those writing in other modern languages); Anglophone scholars have no excuse (aside from linguistic chauvinism and limitations) for neglecting her landmark work on the subject of στάσις in Aristotle's political and ethical writings.