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Good concept, bad politics? The heuristic value of hospitality

Social Research

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This paper assesses the heuristic value of hospitality. Hospitality as a politics or a political justification of border policies is ambivalent. The power of the hosts, the expectations of gratefulness and quiescence from the guests, the temporariness of hospitality, or the hypocrisy and partiality of the welcoming rhetoric, raise doubts about the current revival in activist, political, and scholarly mobilizations of the concept. Nevertheless, I argue that hospitality as an analytical tool has a heuristic role in migration studies. I reconstruct the main conceptualizations of hospitality—an “ordinary practice of accommodation,” a “social mechanism,” an “ideology,” an “idea,” or a “normative principle”—to show how it produces new and useful knowledge across different fields. Hospitality helps to describe, explain, and evaluate social phenomena such as the accommodation of migrants at home, the quality of welcome against organized hostility, the justification of resistance to harsh border enforcement, the social construction of foreigners as temporary guests, and the relationships between the religious and legal vocabularies of asylum.

Good concept, bad politics? The heuristic value of hospitality

Hospitality refers to the practice of welcoming and the value that makes welcoming a virtuous act. The self-evident nature of hospitality—we all have welcomed and been welcomed—should not hide the set of rules that govern its practice: Who are “we” who welcome? Whom are we welcoming? Where? For how long? For what reasons? For what purposes? In which circumstances? All these questions specify and organize the practice of hospitality according to social and political norms.

This has two main implications. Firstly, the concept is both descriptive and evaluative. To qualify a person or an action as hospitable, or to claim the term hospitality to name a business (as in the “hospitality industry”), is not a neutral practice. Hospitality sheds “a specific moral light” (Skinner 1989, 11): a warm light of friendliness, openness to the Other, promptness to share or to use generously of one’s possessions. Secondly, the term hospitality is common and used in everyday interactions, but also has different layers of meaning which social scientists, historians, and philosophers mobilize for research purposes.

Hospitality is both a category of practice, “developed and deployed by ordinary social actors,” and a category of analysis, “used by social analysts” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 4). In other words, there is nothing obvious about hospitality, and it should not be simply surrendered to its commercial uses. Hotels and restaurants rebranding themselves as part of the hospitality industry have not convinced scholars that paying for a service amounts to being welcomed, in the “true” sense of the term, even if it involves conflicting interpretations, semantic diversions, or normative considerations.

Let us consider Richard Cumberland’s paradigmatic definition, dating from the 17th century:

“Liberality is Justice conspicuous in Actions, bestowing gratis upon others what is our own. [...] Towards the Miserable, it is called Compassion; and towards the Poor in

particular, *Alms-giving*. Toward Strangers it is called *Hospitality*, especially, if we entertain them in our Houses” (Cumberland 2005, 690–91).

Directly echoing the lessons of Aristotle, Cumberland made of liberality, and hence of hospitality, a necessity to sustain the common good of all against private interests (justice), tempered by the need to “*reserve to our selves sufficient to pursue our own Happiness*” (Cumberland 2005, 689). To Aristotle, property must be rightfully hospitable, while practicing hospitality was the prerequisite for being a virtuous property-owner (Aristotle 1998, 47–48 [1263a]). Hospitality bathes one in the moral light of openness and generosity but does not eschew the traditional social schemes of property and mastery over one’s home. Today, attempts to condition hospitality to cultural homogeneity—one could not welcome without a proper “home,” i.e., a closed cultural nation—signal a similar ambiguity: hospitality is a practice of openness which relies on a principle of closure (property, self-interest, sovereignty, or identity of the political community).

Such ambiguities have made hospitality a contested concept, but also a creative one. From the most banal acts such as receiving friends at home, to moral theories and political discourses, hospitality crosses different scales of human activities which involve organizing interactions between inside and outside, self and other, private and public, familiar and foreign. In its practice and in the discourses and attitudes it generates, hospitality reveals fundamental dynamics of sociality, as well as ethical and political values.

This is particularly salient in migration contexts, where the categories of “outside,” “foreign,” or “other” follow legal and political borders. But is it relevant to conflate the practice of hospitality with migration? As a category of analysis, what does hospitality show and what does it hide? What do we learn, and what do we ignore when we pay attention to the roles of hosts and guests, or to the value of home and welcome in situations of displacement?

I set out to reassess hospitality as a conceptual tool. By reconstructing the ambivalence of hospitality for modern political vocabulary (Section 1), its revival in times of migration troubles (Section 2), and its main conceptualizations (Section 3), I aim to defend the heuristic value of hospitality in migration studies (Section 4).

In his famous study on “the law of hospitality,” Pitt-Rivers (2012, 513) wrote that hospitality “makes the unknown knowable,” meaning that it transforms the (unknown) stranger into a (knowable) guest. While acknowledging its ambiguous politics, I argue that hospitality, as an analytical tool, has an analogous role in migration studies. I show that the paradigm of hospitality—as an “ordinary practice of accommodation,” a “social mechanism,” an “ideology,” an “idea,” or a “normative principle”—describes, explains, and evaluates in new ways and with a broader scope of phenomena here. The latter include the accommodation of migrants at home, the justification of resistance to border enforcement, relationships between the religious and legal vocabularies of asylum, and ascription to the status of guest.

1. Resisting the appeal of hospitality

The vocabulary of hospitality has become pervasive in the literature on migration over the last decade, especially after 2015 and the “summer of migration.” The construction of the influx of asylum-seekers as a humanitarian crisis, and the surge of individual practices to welcome refugees throughout Europe, have made a concept that had largely disappeared from the Western political vocabulary once again relevant.

In the 18th century, however, philosophers considered hospitality obsolete in its traditional sense, as inns and hotels were said to have replaced personal ties and individual charity. This narrative assumed that modern human interactions were more aptly described with notions of self-interest, commerce, and utility rather than with virtue, benevolence, and

tradition. Hospitality was discussed from a historical or religious perspective, but the point was always to underline its disappearance among “civilized” and modern people (Boudou 2020). Montesquieu (1989, 339) could thus write that “hospitality, so rare among commercial countries, is notable among bandit peoples”, and Diderot (1976, 144) that “the sacred hospitality, extinguished everywhere police and social institutions made progress, is only be found among savage nations.” Rousseau regretted that self-interest made hospitality a mere commercial practice: “Those who would thus traffic in the simplest duties of humanity must be a despicable people indeed. I have observed that it is in Europe alone that hospitality is sold” (Rousseau 1992, 134).

At a more conceptual level, the international law tradition had constructed a form of state duty of hospitality, inspired by natural law and religion (Cavallar 2002). But the rise of nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries and this narrative of hospitality as contrary to modernity rendered hospitality all but irrelevant beyond the private sphere or religious traditions. When the concept reappeared in public discourses, it generally referred to the largesse of states towards refugees and exiles. As “refugee” became a legal category, hospitality remained on the side of benevolence and charity rather than justice.

Hence, there are several good reasons to resist the vocabulary of hospitality in the political sphere. Hospitality, as a situation where hosts receive guests in their home, may not be suited to discuss the various claims made either by nation-states or asylum-seekers. The main doubt raised against host-guest politics is that it is too closely tied to an ancient social practice to help make sense of contemporary issues (O’Neill 2000, 186–87). It is tainted by paternalism (of hosts over guests), religiosity (of a “sacred” duty), essentialism (of home and strangers), and power relations in disguise (Rozakou 2012; Chamberlain 2020).

Indeed, hospitality is hardly compatible with equality. The relationship between hosts and guests implies deference to the host, gratitude for what must be experienced as a

generous gift, and, as a guest, a sense of one's role and place. A foreigner-as-guest has remained the one who must "behave in a peaceable manner in the place he happens to be in" (Kant 1991, 106). Cicero also stated it plainly: "It is the duty of a foreigner or resident alien to do nothing except his own business, asking no questions about anyone else, and never to meddle in public affairs, which are not his own" (Cicero 1991, 48).

These rules of respect, politeness, and civility tend to depoliticize the power relations between citizens and non-citizens, or between the state and migrants, and limit the ability of the latter to exercise full political agency. Guest status assignment prevents contentious politics. As Sayad (2004) showed regarding the demand of politeness to Algerians in France, or Anderson regarding the "rigged rules of civility" that "provided excuses for endless stonewalling" (Anderson 2010, 98) against rights claims during segregation in the United States, the moralization of politics through domestic imageries tends to work against minorities.

Closely related to inequality is the precarious nature of hospitality practices. Hospitality cannot last "forever;" as a form of benevolence, it must remain an exceptional moment. It is described as an exception to the rule, a surplus of humanity in the scales of justice, a principle of generosity in its "equal" treatment of persons. Perhaps no one has better formulated this tension than Vladimir Jankélévitch, when he juxtaposed the arithmetic of "the just" with the overflow of charity, the "metrics of justice" with the "passionate maximalism of love:

"The most juridical minds have always sensed that justice itself would not be viable without the unjust, unreasonable, incomprehensible exception that breathes life into it. This is precisely the role of the generous approximation: the oil of misunderstanding, the lubricating approximation grease the wheels of social life." (Jankélévitch 2011, 76)

Hospitality signals a reason beyond the law and a clear articulation of rights and duties. It addresses the demands made by particular Others which the "juridical minds" may

overlook. I will come back later to this “excessive” view of hospitality, but let me simply mention here that it can legitimately be interpreted as entrenching arbitrariness. In fact, one can argue that hospitality and other acts of love or beneficence fall short of what justice requires. As Kant wrote: “[W]ere we all to behave thus, and perform no act of love or kindness, but left the rights of every man inviolate, there would be no misery in the world” (Kant 1997, 179).

Thus, hospitality is opposed to the regularity of the Law. As it stands on the side of beneficence and compassion, it is exposed to the hazards and uncertainties of something which can be asked for, but never rightfully claimed. With the example of hospitality, the lawyer Rudolf von Jhering justified the replacement of gratuitousness and favor with compensation and business:

“Let him [the reader] suppose he has the choice between a journey into a land where he can find hotels everywhere, and into one in which there are no inns at all, but where this want is replaced by a general hospitality. [...] I doubt not that he would decide for the country of inns. Hospitality is a fine thing, truly; one which opens the door to the weary wanderer [...]; yet for practical life [...] an inn is better than hospitality. For an inn gives me the certainty of a reception, which I have not in hospitality; and my money spares me the humiliation of a request, of accepting a favour, of giving thanks – my freedom and independence on the journey lie in my purse.” (Jhering 1913, 90–91)

Finally, hospitality stands in contrast to a crucial concern of philosophical liberalism: impartiality. Hospitality may appear to be an impartial practice at first sight: It welcomes “all” strangers, without distinctions among race, nationality, or religion, in the manner of the universalist words of Paul (Ephesians 2:14-19 ; Colossians 3:11), or of the Good Samaritan who helps the wounded stranger. Therefore, it should be a principle of openness to the neighbor in general (Ricoeur 1998). In practice, however, neighbors are generally not anonymous strangers, and the host is the one to determine which strangers deserve hospitality. This makes it a partial and biased practice and virtue that contradicts the ideal of impartiality.

I will not elaborate further on the essentialist, colonial, and nativist undertones which

the rhetoric of hospitality in politics carries. Rosello (2001), Bessone (2015), Carpi and Şenoğuz (2019), Holzberg (2021), Chamberlain (2020), and DeBono (2019) have convincingly shown that speaking of hospitality in terms of migration policies is inherently statist, and often hypocritical and detrimental to migrants. It leaves them in the position of needy and powerless guests, no different from the “weary wanderer” Jhering (1913) mentioned in the quote above.

At face value, hospitality for migrants enacts a form of “domopolitics” (Walters 2004; Taylor 2020) ruling over foreigners as if they were (un)invited guests. As such, the norms of domestic hospitality apply, such as remaining discreet, being aware and respectful of the house rules, and leaving after a while. Thus, one can legitimately conclude that hospitality is epistemologically inadequate and normatively undesirable. It systematically relies on methodological nationalism and legitimizes the perspective of the hosts, understood as the natives, nationals, or citizens acting out of generosity towards foreigners.

2. Hospitality or open borders? A clarification

I have underlined some limitations to the politics of hospitality for contemporary migration. At the same time, I have noted that what has been experienced as a new configuration of migration has resurrected the ancient-rooted concept.

In 2015, more than one million migrants arrived in Europe by sea or land. Most were fleeing conflicts in Syria, Libya, Iraq, or Afghanistan. The number of asylum applications rose from roughly 216,000 to one million between 2014 and 2015 (Euronews 2015). Since then, the Mediterranean Sea has become the deadliest migration route, as 22,748 people have been reported dead or missing (Sunderland 2021). Some countries opened their borders, such as Germany, which quickly planned to welcome about 800,000 refugees. Conversely, Hungary decided to erect a fence along the Serbian and Croatian border and to send to prison

refugees who crossed it illegally (Thorpe 2016). The issues at stake for the European Union have been framed as both political and economic, but also moral.

Scholars, activists, and some political leaders retrieved hospitality as a virtue and a duty that should inspire European countries during this “crisis.” A European petition launched in March 2016 ended with a straightforward call: “There is no other alternative: hospitality and right to asylum or savagery!” (Agier et al. 2016). The reinterpretation of a historical and familiar value, common to religious and secular traditions which had supposedly guided Europe from Homeric times to modern post-war refugee flows (Boucheron 2015; Graziani 2015), became essential to bluntly claiming that something was going wrong. Hospitality is opposed to closure and indifference to the fate of the displaced. It formulates an immemorial obligation to care, and take care, that the practice is not limited by the legal duties owed to refugees. It relates to a form of common decency; it is so obvious that one must be hospitable to those in dire need, that closing one’s doors in such difficult circumstances has revealed that states have lost their moral compass entirely.

Notice that hospitality is here only a matter of state power over their borders. It merely offers a rallying cry for letting people in. Why, then, should one speak of hospitality when open borders are the real goal?

The critique of states’ inhospitality targets a problem deeper than the exclusion of asylum-seekers. The critique encompasses an assessment of the conditions of exclusion and the way borders are enforced. Michael Walzer captured this point well: “Strangers can be welcomed or not welcomed; they cannot be admitted or excluded. Of course, being welcomed or not welcomed is sometimes effectively the same thing as being admitted or excluded, but the distinction is theoretically important” (Walzer 1983, 36).

In other words, open borders differ from practicing hospitality. The former let people move in and out, while the latter hints at the conditions in which people are received.

Hospitality signals a quality: being greeted, properly or decently received, is different from being free to circulate.

As Stavo-Debaugue (2018) and Carlier (2020) demonstrated with the idea of urban hospitality, hospitality includes spaces, accommodations, homemaking practices, services, or discourses that make a world inhabitable. Hospitality is not merely a matter of openness as it, in fact, requires forms of closure, echoing the delimitation of a home space which offers protection, privacy, and intimacy. Similarly, borders and sovereignty may seem to be necessary forms of closure to provide protection to people on the move; a refuge needs to be closed off from what caused the need to seek refuge in the first place. Hence, hospitality appears more rightfully as the opposite of hostility (i.e., harassment and deterrence strategies and apparatuses which make the secure existence of migrants impossible).

The British example of explicit “hostile environment” policies is a case in point of organized inhospitality. The goal is “to dissuade illegal residence in the UK by preventing people from accessing basic services” through a series of vexing controls throughout the social and bureaucratic levels of society, “requiring migrants to prove frequently their right to reside during everyday life” (Griffiths and Yeo 2021, 2–3). However, can hospitality formulate a relevant political response to this purposefully hostile policy? Theresa May justified her decision by saying that “what we don’t want is a situation where people think that they can come here and overstay because they’re able to access everything they need.” (Travis 2013).

To “overstay” is the typical offense against hospitality: I have been welcomed as a guest, and became an intruder once I overstayed your welcome. Although it is clear that the “hostile environment” concept has distorted the meaning of “overstay”—as the “Windrush scandal” testifies: as a result of the hostile environment policies, people who had arrived to the UK before 1973 from former colonies, especially the “Windrush generation” from the

Caribbean, have been considered as illegal immigrants; some have even been detained and deported despite being permanent residents (Gentleman 2019)—the vocabulary of temporary hospitality towards “guests” enables these forms of abuse. Again, there is something vexing about hospitality taken at face value as an inclusive, positive, and generous practice.

Jacques Derrida (2000) famously coined the term “hostipitality” to underline the “hostile” dimension of hospitality, which he unpacked from its etymological roots and propensity to switch from openness to closure. Although I believe that Derrida committed an etymological fallacy by seeing a formal structure in the complex origins of the term—the Latin word *hostis* first meant “the stranger,” then “the enemy”—his critical gaze could be useful in detecting the dangers of a naïve and simplistic use of the concept in politics.

As Wilcock argued regarding the limitations of hospitality as a ground for resisting hostility, “without rights to participate in society independently, being made to ‘feel welcome’ is somewhat insufficient for many of those without status” (Wilcock 2019, 144). But hospitality being “insufficient,” or at least ambivalent, does not mean it is unnecessary.

3. Reconceptualizing hospitality

The notion of hospitality circulates among different disciplines, covers different grounds, and often oscillates between normative and descriptive conceptions. Before uncovering its heuristic value, I will briefly reconstruct its main conceptualizations. I will highlight five of them here: hospitality as an ordinary practice of accommodation, a mechanism, an ideology, an idea, and a normative principle.

Hospitality as a practice of accommodation is mainly used descriptively. It is close to its usual understanding (hosting, welcoming, receiving guests), meaning “the rendering of comfort to a visitor within one’s own territory” (Herzfeld 1987, 77). Comfort involves peaceful exchanges (material or symbolic), fulfilment of the basic needs of the guest, and

opportunities to learn from and about each other. But opening one's house, offering food, or guaranteeing the security of the guest can have far-reaching political consequences in a migratory context where the state's control of movement and its reluctance to enforce asylum-related laws make of hospitality a potential site of resistance.

Describing what occurs in a scene of hospitality reveals a more complex situation. In her exploration of a feminist conception of hospitality, Hamington (2010, 26) argued that, as a practice, hospitality had a performative dimension that actualized the shared and connected identities of the host and the guest, while Rottmann and Nimer (2021, 2) illustrated how the private sphere of hospitality could become “a site of contention, whereby wider sociopolitical subjectivities are renegotiated.” Hosting in a context of national hostility towards migrants is *de facto* a critical statement on the state's actions. Private homes offer a form of surrogate asylum as states are reluctant to provide it. Their owners set an example to show what could and should be done (Merikoski 2021). Mundane practices of hospitality, such as the offering of food or tea by Syrian refugees in Belgium (Vandevoordt 2017), can reverse the usual host-guest dynamic of dependency and allow the temporary guests to regain a sense of autonomy and dignity.

Anthropologists have analyzed hospitality and its formal and ritual practices as an interaction mechanism. Pitt-Rivers (2012) formalized the concept of a “law of hospitality” which required peacefulness, respect (of the guest, the host, and the law of hospitality itself), honor, and protection. Beyond what is exchanged during hospitality, Marshall Sahlins considered hospitality a condition for “good relations.” It “provides an atmosphere in which direct exchange of presents and trade goods can be equitably consummated” (Sahlins 2017, 199) and acts as a mechanism to “suggest sociability” (Sahlins 2017, 189).

As I have argued elsewhere (Boudou 2012), hospitality rituals signal the broader organization of the host community and its relationships to foreigners, but also its

conceptualizations of social and political boundaries and scope of reciprocity. Hospitality is a mechanism that allows contact without integration and a peaceful management of distrust towards foreigners.

Social scientists studying the circulations of the concept of hospitality in migratory contexts have devoted attention to the discrepancies between the outer positive aspects of hospitality and its function as an ideology that entrenches processes of exclusion. Carpi and Şenoğuz (2019) convincingly demonstrated the effects of the discourse of hospitality in the case of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Turkey. Relabeling humanitarianism has served a geopolitical agenda (virtue-signaling, to put it briefly), and polarized populations between hosts and guests, even when prior social relations existed around the border:

“the reconfiguration of the refugee-host social encounter in terms of hospitality started to reproduce spaces to which some inhabitants belonged – whose sense of belonging was reinforced by their act of hosting – and to which others did not. [...] Syrian nationals therefore turned into temporary guests, even when they were already inhabiting the same space as cheap labourers” (Carpi and Pinar Şenoğuz 2019, 132).

Hospitality functions as an ideology that fuels nationalism and the domination of citizens over non-citizens under the guise of a disinterested act.

The most enduring conception of hospitality remains its philosophical elaboration as a practical idea. I take *idea* here in the Kantian definition of the term: a “moral perfection whose object can never be adequately given in experience,” “a yardstick by which to estimate our moral worth, and to know the degree to which we are faulty and deficient” (Kant 1997, 229).

Derrida influentially reformulated the idea of hospitality as unconditional and unpredictable (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000). There can be no law of hospitality, as it should be a constant reinvention of a relation, and there should not be any conditions to the arrival of “the Other.” Thus, Derrida pointed to an unbridgeable gap between the ethical demands of hospitality and its legal-political instantiations. He underlined the tension

between a pure concept of unconditional hospitality and conditional hospitality; therefore, not pure hospitality and, in fact, almost inhospitality.

More precisely, Derrida exposed a double dilemma of hospitality. Firstly, political practices of hospitality necessarily taint the concept with the violence of law and politics, while also opening the political community to others. Secondly, remaining faithful to a pure idea of hospitality is an infinite task that puts one's identity and home at risk in letting anyone enter without conditions, while also suggesting that political hospitality is always perfectible. Although we can often find the theme of transaction between ethics and politics in Derrida's work, he argues that the movement from idea to concrete practice is bound to fail. "Unconditional" hospitality can only take place in the form of a conditional practice which, necessarily, chooses (and therefore excludes), discriminates, and questions the newcomer.

Finally, as argued in the previous section, a more overt normative principle of hospitality has emerged as a critical standard of legitimacy and democracy at the borders. The goal is not an open border politics: The self-determination of democratic peoples, as a form of closure, entails here a *prima facie* right to control borders, in accordance with cosmopolitan norms (Benhabib 2004). Against the criminalization of movement, the domineering practices to enforce borders that jeopardize the basic interests and human rights of migrants, and the neglect of certain forms of oppression as grounds for asylum, hospitality formulates a counter-narrative and a counter-politics to nationalist and sovereigntist exclusion.

Echoing Kant's "cosmopolitan right [...] limited to conditions of universal hospitality" (Kant 1991, 105), hospitality should guarantee the right "not to be treated with hostility" and to be welcomed if being turned away would endanger one's life. There is no need to radically expand on Kant's perspective to consider that a principle of hospitality concurs with a global

reindexation of values, giving priority to the respect and enforcement of the human rights of migrants over states' interests.

4. The heuristic value of hospitality

How do we solve this tension between a concept that seems inadequate for contemporary politics and its revival as a productive, although contentious, concept? What are the analytical benefits of mobilizing hospitality, when open borders, human rights, justice, or solidarity seemingly provide enough traction?

Following the main conceptualizations of hospitality explained above, I contend that there are five main areas where it brings an original and productive perspective on the social and political phenomena of migration. In doing so, I aim to defend the heuristic potential of hospitality.

Studying the ordinary practices of accommodation sheds light on major issues. Firstly, it helps to include home and homemaking practices under normative and political scrutiny while thus far, the political value of home has received scant attention. Individuals leave their home, find one, create one, feel more or less at home, and experience its deprivation, but what we mean by that remains unclear. The current turn from migration to the encompassing paradigm of displacement, including within borders in phenomena such as gentrification and the eviction of citizens, brings into question the value of home in a more pressing way (i.e., how exactly it matters to people and why it has material and normative power). Hospitality metaphorically opens the doors of home as a site where politics is done in a non-political way. Rather than pondering the nature of the right, duty, or obligation of hospitality, the focus here is on the emotional aspect of home (in feelings of attachment, ease, intimacy, or nostalgia), the specific harms that its deprivation creates, and how hospitable practices respond to them.

Secondly, ordinary hospitality also means ordinary uses of the word “hospitality.” The thickness of the concept in terms of religious, moral, or historical prestige provides an expressive quality to one’s actions or beliefs. In other words, there is a specific effect in speaking of hospitality, echoing Skinner’s “special moral light” mentioned in the introduction. It summons an imaginary of virtuous generosity and openness which identifies these actions with religious, moral, and historical traditions that go beyond mere legal or political ones. In other words, calling upon hospitality evokes the “superior laws of humanity” (Balibar 1997) rather than any political ideology. This is a crucial element for understanding that hospitality helps to prevent the politicization of what welcoming citizens consider as pure moral altruism or humanitarianism (Hamann and Karakayali 2016). This refusal of politics enables collective actions among people with very different sociological and ideological profiles. They do not act in the name of a conception of what should be a just policy of migration, but against blatant injustices and distress which common-sense morality dictates should be relieved.

Hospitality, understood as a social mechanism, integrates culturally varied experiences of welcome. It takes into consideration religious justifications of the duty to welcome, ritual practices, and faith-based organizational structures, which are usually shunned by secular theorists in an abstract civil society. Here we have a concept that bridges the strict opposition between religious and secular vocabularies. It can rely on other rationales, and requires other practices, than humanitarian actions. Neighborliness, friendship, brotherhood, honor, and respect have become active notions that organize migrant accommodation in ways that are religiously and culturally much more specific than humanitarian help (Lauterbach 2021; Zaman 2017).

To view hospitality as a mechanism also expands the types of entities we can regard as being part of a relation of hospitality. Consider Alvin Gouldner’s famous

conceptualization of the norms of reciprocity and beneficence, which he defined as generic rules of social interactions, i.e., “a kind of plastic filler, capable of being poured into the shifting crevices of social structures, and serving as a kind of all-purpose moral cement” (Gouldner 1975, 249–50). Hospitality is a “concrete normative orientation” of the norm of beneficence (Gouldner 1975, 266).

Such a relational approach to hospitality, defined by the relation it creates rather than by the entities it relates, is epistemologically useful for its flexibility. For instance, making an environment welcoming, building a host-guest relationship, or preventing hostile interactions can also apply to our relations with non-humans. As Latour (2007, 262) wrote, “so many other entities are now knocking on the door of our collectives. Is it absurd to want to retool our disciplines to become sensitive again to the noise they make and to try to find a place for them?”. Hospitality constitutes a functional norm to analyze this renewed sensitivity to a broader set of non-human entities, such as animals, or even potential aliens and spirits (Boudou 2016, 205–9).

Understanding hospitality as an ideology enables a critical standpoint on contemporary forms of domopolitics. I have argued that including the value of home and homemaking practices is of crucial importance to make sense of specific harms and needs that occur in displacement. At the same time, conflating the political community with home leads to unfair expectations towards foreigners. A would-be citizen should not have to behave like a guest, and citizens should not act as if the country, its laws and institutions, are their own property. The tendency to require politeness, deference, or good manners from newcomers necessarily moralizes a political relationship, homogenizes the community, forcefully tames political conflicts, infantilizes migrants, and leaves an underspecified margin of appreciation for the state to decide whether “guests” behave properly (Boudou 2021b).

“The dream of home is dangerous,” wrote Bonnie Honig (1994, 585), as is the fantasy of a hospitable democracy.

Following hospitality as it makes its way into policy discourses raises important questions, such as, why is “welcome” more important than “inclusion?” To what extent is reciprocity expected from welcomed guests? What kinds of conflict are avoided or prohibited? Which form of equality is made impossible? These issues need to be addressed when the vocabulary of hospitality replaces that of law- and politics-based relations. Such a discourse reveals an imaginary of the political community that may turn into an exclusionary ideology. Both because welcoming involves a certain quality of inclusion and because hospitality relies on the continuance of an unequal relationship, claiming to be hospitable can translate into receiving very few guests and remaining “forever” the host, even towards native populations in colonial contexts.

As Derrida put it, “one can become virtually xenophobic in order to protect or claim to protect one’s own hospitality” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, 53). This is not the only outcome of political hospitality—I have argued how hospitality practices can become egalitarian and emancipatory (Boudou 2021a, 93–94)—but studying its weaponization for exclusionary purposes contributes to a finer understanding of the contradictions between institutional practices and their professed principles.

Derrida’s idea of hospitality has attracted criticism for its abstraction and supposedly ingenuous purity, a rather uncommon quality in his philosophy. Derrida himself acknowledged that pure hospitality only made sense poetically (Derrida 2001). What remained was a personal experience of the aporia: “I do all I can to try to adjust my ‘commitments’ to the unconditional affirmation that runs through ‘deconstruction.’ [...] I do often feel these aporias as tragic pains” (Derrida 2005, 128–29). Nevertheless, his development of the paradoxical structure of hospitality—a pure idea of unconditional

openness necessarily betrayed by its practical translations—proved to be central. Pierre Bourdieu referred to “politics of purity” in describing the “engagement” of the first public intellectuals at the end of the 19th century. People like Émile Zola were publicly naming and shaming the state and its institutions for their role in the Dreyfus affair “gave birth to a *politics of purity* which was the perfect antithesis of the ‘Raison d'Etat’” (Bourdieu 1991, 658). Bourdieu further asks:

“What was the basis of this anti-political politics? It was the existence of social worlds whose fundamental law was the refusal of the legality specific to the economic and political fields, the refusal of ends and values that these fields recognized, such as money, power, honors. [...] [The intellectuals] affirmed the right to *transgress* the most sacred values of the collectivity—those of patriotism and of nationalism [...]. They founded their authority upon the unwritten laws of an ethical and scientific universalism in order to exercise a kind of moral ministry and to launch, on certain occasions, a collective mobilization for the purposes of a struggle designed to disperse throughout the whole social world the values which were current in their own universe.” (Bourdieu 1991, 658)

This accurately describes what Derrida and others did when publicly reacting against the criminalization of solidarity and hospitality. Derrida set a “pure” and “transgressive” concept with which to call for “a politics of the foreigner, a right of foreigners that will not be a dereliction of justice” (Derrida 2002, 144). Hospitality as a pure idea offers a reason to mobilize that does not disappear, as it aims at an ideal of justice that cannot be satisfied.

The dual experience of an urgent *and* impossible hospitality could easily lead to despair, as Derrida himself conceded (Derrida 2006, 212). Yet, it also suggests that we can do more and better. Hospitality is a principle that generates political hope. It prevents any satisfactory compromise between what should ideally be done to welcome others and what is actually done:

“[The absolute pole of unconditional hospitality is] the place from which immediate and concrete matters of urgency are dictated. The political task then remains of finding the best ‘legislative’ transaction, the best ‘juridical’ conditions to bring it about, so that in a given situation the ethics of hospitality are not in principle violated – and are respected as far as possible.” (Derrida 2005, 131)

This is a meliorist project, in the pragmatist sense, one to make hospitality into a goal

that is increasingly plausible as we work towards the conditions of its actualization. Every step is necessary, but not sufficient, and political hospitality is one of these steps. Asylum, fraternity, sanctuary, solidarity, or inclusion may be other steps in leading us towards a hospitable world where no one is treated with hostility. Each of these concepts considers foreigners as generative of duties of recognition, support, and care. This is, in fact, how Cicero—and later, Grotius—characterized justice: ‘*Justitia foras spectat*’, literally ‘justice looks outside’ or ‘justice is concerned by what is beyond ourselves’; it ‘extends to the interests of others’ (Grotius 2005, 97).

This vocabulary helps to describe the practices and reasons that open communities to the needs, interests, pleas, claims, and rights of outsiders, and towards resisting ideals of autarchy. In this sense, a principle of hospitality contributes to the logic of “cosmopolitan humility,” which Cabrera (2020) described in opposition to “state arrogance.”

Hence, this meliorist endeavor would also require an exercise of imagination to welcome the perspectives of foreigners and render citizens more sensitive to their interests. This is how Arendt read Kant’s hospitality: thinking means to “train one’s imagination to go visiting” (Arendt 1992, 43) as well as “making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them” (Arendt 1969, 241). While hospitality is merely a metaphor here, I believe that such cosmopolitanism of the mind legitimizes institutions to practically represent the interests of non-citizens within nation-states (Boudou forthcoming). Thus, taking the idea of hospitality seriously opens new conceptual and institutional paths for more responsive and inclusive democracies.

Conclusion

“Neither a man of many guests nor a man with none,” recalled Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Chapter IX-10). He also noted the wordplay on *xenos* in his *Rhetoric*

(Book III, Chapter XI-8): “a guest should not be a stranger forever.” I believe that both these proverbial sayings were hinting at the necessary-but-not-sufficient quality of a politics of hospitality: welcoming too many means including too few, and welcoming them too long means, in fact, excluding them. Hence, we must remain cautious when mobilizing hospitality in migration contexts.

Migration involves a complex set of rights that ranges from minimal protection of human rights to full integration into a political and legal regime. A liberal democracy, based on the rule of law and the main treaties of international law signed, can rightly decline that its migration policies be placed under the heading of hospitality. To a certain extent, hospitality as a political or legal principle should remain disappointing. It relies on certain forms of closure which reinforce nationalist biases, thus proving to be limited in asserting the freedom of migrants and the equality between established citizens and outsiders.

Nevertheless, evaluating the quality of welcome, justifying citizens’ welcoming practices against the state’s hostility, and keeping in sight the ideal of an inhabitable world for everyone, sustain hospitality as a valuable political concept. The ambiguous politics of hospitality should not prevent us from using it as a category of analysis.

I argued here that there is considerable gain in looking at migration through the lenses of hospitality. It takes the value of home and homemaking practices seriously, and the claim to be hospitable as an expressive quality that circumvents the politicization of one’s helpful actions. It has an epistemological flexibility that helps to bridge the gap between secular and religious approaches to welcoming, and to depict new relationships between humans and non-humans.

Studying the diffusion of the vocabulary of hospitality in the political sphere sharpens the critique of domopolitics, while arguing for an ideal of hospitality keeps the demand for just border politics open-ended. Finally, the path that hospitality opens beyond a mere

welcome is that of the democratic inclusion of non-citizens, which would require institutional improvements to be realized.

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