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Book Review

Derrida, Jacques, *La Hospitalidad*¹

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The following book review is aimed at discussing a complex concept of hospitality in Jacques Derrida. His work, titled *On Hospitality (La Hospitalidad)*, was published for the first time in 1997 as *Anne Dufourmantelle invite Jacques Derrida à répondre de l'hospitalité*. In 2006 a new release was published by Ediciones de la Flor in Spanish (first edition). In this book, Derrida initiates a discussion on how to understand hospitality from a philosophical perspective. Interestingly, the first point Derrida analyzes is the question about foreigners (*xenos*).

In the dialogues of Plato, the foreigner is frequently presented as the one who asks about others. As a consequence, the foreigner shakes the rein of dogmatism about being in which he is and the world where he does not lie. Derrida considers as guests those who come accompanied by a different language and culture from that of the host community. A difference like this not only reminds us of our own prejudices but also re-elaborates a new sense for our societal institutions. These issues threaten paternal hegemonies and question the significance of hospitality. However, in his work *The Sophist* Plato refers to foreigners as outsiders who do not speak and share *my* understanding; needless to say that this thesis is in sharp contrast to Parmenides's turn of mind who argued that the universality of knowledge does not recognize other languages or nations; to be or not a stranger seems to be circumstantially irrelevant.

How do we interpret this? Hospitality is offered, or not offered, to a foreigner and his personal properties. Under the same context, we understand the world from questions of knowledge and experiences that others bring to us. The stranger splits our world into two parts.² It is often assumed that our identity is born in the heart our family, city or nation; however for Derrida this is not possible since our identity is formed by the inception of "others." This way, only outsiders know, see, and ask for an explanation about our customs and habits beyond the limits of ethnocentrism. If we look down on others who look different from us, then we also despise ourselves.

Derrida suggests that the question is conceptually linked to the foreigner. Like the foreigner, the question may (or not) be hosted; in some occasion the question would be welcomed but under another situation may be rejected. This way, we may bring our hospitality before a question. But does it make sense to interrogate when the host does not allow it in the first place?

¹ Buenos Aires: De la Flor Edition, 2006. 160 pp.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

This question, which Derrida repeats throughout his book, is a broadly abstract metaphor that symbolizes the restriction that often faces a stranger when he is far away from home. To be more exact, in *The Apology* of Plato, Socrates spoke to the citizens and judges and argued that he does not understand the language of the trial. Socrates is declared not guilty by himself since he does not share the same rhetoric as the judges. Socrates faced the Athenian court of law as a “foreigner.”

Following this, Derrida maintains that, “among the problems we handle here, there is a foreigner who unable to speak the language of the host country, may be rejected or injured without any type of defense.”³ The language of the host interrogates violently and suddenly since it imposes the home owner's interpretation. Therefore, the foreigner is forced to adopt another tongue which is not the one he usually speaks or writes. The host's translation is part of his very own abode and, according to Derrida, it is precisely the point where the possibility of hospitality takes place.

In the succeeding pages of the book, Derrida treats the notion of hospitality within the context of the rights of the foreigner. If we wish to think in one instance about the power of the name, once more, we will find a paradox since hospitality does not apply to a foreigner without a name, patrimony, or family. To be more exact, anonymity lies excluded from hospitality because nobody offers lodging to a person who is not recognized, at least through the name. Following the same point of view, Derrida affirms that this is the strict difference between foreigners and others. It remains to be seen whether migration and tourism are under the same category.

Therefore, two types of hospitality surface accordingly: *the absolute* and *conditioned*. In this sense, “the absolute hospitality demands the host to open the proper home not only before foreigners but also before anonymous Travellers who are unknown for me. This way, I am obliged to let them to enter but to ask reciprocity.”⁴ In order to resume the discussion, a couple of conditions are needed to make hospitality possible: what is your name? and where do you come from?

As a consequence, Derrida is convinced that the rights of the foreigner are within hospitality itself. If a foreigner arrives at a country, he is immediately subjected to the host laws even when they would be unknown to him. Each foreigner is constructed from the host country's “ethos.” Based on Hegel's explanation, the Right is determined by the family, the bourgeoisie society, and the Estate; these limits create a liaison between hospitality and hostility. At first instance, hospitality means certain protection, whereas hostility refers to the violence directed to *xenos* (those who do not belong to our group).

On the other hand, the problem lies indeed in the communication among different actors and the role of the State in that interaction. In a hotel or in a shopping complex, for instance, a guest and host may interact in private;

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

but when a crime is involved, the police takes over the scene by interrogating the actors or by tapping phone lines; under this circumstance, hospitality momentarily disappears. Privacy and hospitality are ruled by some structures like the State, Law, Justice or Police. Following Kant, Derrida sustains “How to distinguish a guest from a parasite? Principally, the different is in *strictu sensu* but for that is necessary to respect the law.”⁵

If we analyze this matter from a Kantian perspective, we must also admit that the moral is constituted internally in relation to the ego, therefore the police is legitimated to search us even in psychological terms. Derrida clarifies this issue by arguing that hospitality is due to “the Right,” which is always conditional. For instance, a guest may be very well lodged under the principle of hospitality even when he remains as the foreigner but he is obliged to respect the laws of the locale where he is currently lodging. If not, the reciprocity between the guest and the host will be “breached.” Aside from this point, Derrida affirms that “the relationship with a foreigner is ruled by the right, for being the right part of justice.”⁶

However, how do we fully understand Derrida when he claims that “there is no hospitality?” Moreover, how do we interpret his concept of justice? If rights are within us, then we may reckon justice according to our proper views. If such is the case, why does Derrida claim that there is no such thing as hospitality? On the one hand, hospitality invites us to break rules by marking powers, limits and authorities while, on the other hand, the other transgresses of his laws. It does not mean that the foreigner should be jailed and considered a criminal unless the unconditioned hospitality contradicts the foundation of his own reception. In other words, hospitality works paradoxically in two different senses: one by affirming the social order through the law, and by not subjecting the law to common citizens, it transgresses the notion of universal citizenship.

Moreover, Derrida intends to discuss the role of language in conjunction with birth and death. An exile always carries the maternal language which is present not only in life but also in death. For this reason, the immigrants are faced with a dilemma, whether to return to their native land or to stay. Derrida refers to the story of Oedipus. Oedipus died as a self-imposed outcast, away from his land; beyond any law or rights. His daughter, Antigone, did not know the exact place where her father passed away. It looks as though he wished to depart but left traces to guide his beloved daughters in finding his corpse.

Following the logic of this discourse, we can realize that Oedipus did not leave the earth without a plan. The tradition will be warranted at this cost, this tradition will save the City since the secret was kept in Teseo. Initially, Oedipus is too quick to go where he will encounter the gods. In analogy, the memory lies in the anonymity of his death, just like Christ, Oedipus desired to be remembered eternally and therefore he does not give any information about

⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

the place where he is planning to die. Consequently, the host (Teseo) turns at the same time in hostage due to an involuntary promise he made to Oedipus. After the death of Oedipus, his daughters suffered for two main reasons: principally, they are not able to see their father's body and secondly, the idea that he preferred to die abroad tormented them. The tragedy ended when Antigone committed suicide. However, what does this have to do with hospitality?

Indeed, Oedipus' legend is useful for Derrida to explain his thesis about the foreigner. Simply, the foreigner goes in the city like an emancipator, occasionally he intends to create new laws. He comes from the outside, from abroad. Then, the host allows the foreigner to lodge in the former's home after receiving the pertinent invitation. This strange moment seizes the host through the manipulation of the secret. All appears to be as if the father (*pater familiae*) becomes a prisoner of his own power and authority. Particularly, this situation makes it clear that we are hosted by "the other" whom we invite to enter our home. For Derrida, hostility is one of many ways to regulate an undesired guest (considered as parasite).

Finally, Derrida decides to tackle hospitality from the standpoint of the philosophy of language. The author maintains that there are two senses of speaking: the *strict* and *wide*. If we think of our tongue in a wide sense, Derrida says an Israeli intellectual bourgeois has to do with me more than a French policeman. In this case, the language does nothing to do with the nation. Otherwise, if we apply the strict sense (conditioned hospitality), an Israeli bourgeois will be more of an occasional meeting to Derrida than a French worker. Not only does this example help Derrida in explaining how hospitality may be applied but also delineates the different classifications that come from such application.⁷ But this looks to be a surface expression of a much more deep-seated issue; in fact, a hospital in combination with a hotel synthesize both types of hospitalities. Whereas at hospitals patients (strangers) are usually seen without any restriction in regards to patrimony or origin, at hotels consumers or guests are welcomed in a time-frame wherein they should vouch for their stay by their patrimony (conditional hospitality). Another example that explains the difference between unconditional and conditional hospitality is the Nation State's treatment of migrants and tourists, respectively. In the case of migrants, they are subject to strict and arbitrary laws and are sometimes jailed and deported when demands from the host state are not met. While tourists are encouraged to stay and enjoy themselves, but not to say that they are not subject to some laws—but in this case, the status of the host country matters (e.g., First World or Third World). Throughout the globe, Nation States promote the return of tourists for its economic benefits.

In this context, the wide sense of hospitality (unconditional) is more flexible with laws, while the strict sense (conditional) is inextricably based on some legal structure which points a finger to the foreigner and asks what is your name?, where do you come from?, or what do you want? From Derrida's

⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

point of view, these senses of hospitality could not work together and would only result to social and political pathologies.

To conclude, we admit that Derrida's essay is an important contribution to the study of hospitality. Therefore, we strongly suggest that this book be read by those who are interested in critically analyzing the significance and difficulties involved in the question of the nature of hospitality. Derrida could very well be a key in understanding the intricate nature of migration and tourism.

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