

## Jacques Derrida: Hospitality: Volume I

Review: Jacques Derrida: Hospitality: Volume I, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2023, 320 pp., 44,99 USD.

One might say that our time is defined by a profound lack of hospitality. From the way we perceive immigrants and refugees at our borders to the way we treat those already dwelling in our states, the spirit of the age is hostility.

In this context, the publication of the seminar Jacques Derrida taught on ‘Hospitality’ between 1995-1997, now translated into English for the first time, is apposite. It is published in two volumes. The first volume reproduces at greater length questions and ideas already found in 1999’s *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas* and 2000’s *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. This fact might, at first glance, suggest that the seminar provides little new material. Indeed, across the nine sessions, Derrida raises familiar questions concerning the difference between ‘conditional’ and ‘unconditional hospitality’; the (Kantian) right to hospitality in the age of cosmopolitanism; the connection between hospitality and power, and more. That the seminar provides little in the way of new material does not, however, diminish its significance either within Derrida scholarship, nor within a broader thinking about hospitality in the contemporary environment of xenophobia and violence, as well as addressing essential notions of place, belonging and home.

The seminar opens almost immediately with a reading of Kant and his discussion of a ‘cosmopolitan right’ to hospitality. Despite Kant’s intention to articulate a universal right, open to all, Derrida immediately shows, in characteristically hesitant yet declarative style that this right, far from universal, is in fact only open to citizens of states (Derrida 2023: 3) – therefore, not to the stateless – humans (Ibid.); therefore, not to those designated inhuman; and those, who submit to the power or authority of the host (5).

Derrida reads and counterreads Kantian hospitality, laying out its implied and explicit limitations and implications in a way that very quickly introduces resonances and dialogues with Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger, Plato, the French government, Robert Klossowski, Émile Benveniste and Michel de Montaigne: all in the first session! Among these diverse threads, which splay out in the pattern of a shredded rope, Derrida calls particular attention to the indissociability of concepts of ipseity, power and I-hood. The key idea here is that hospitality necessarily demands a moment in which the host says to the guest: welcome, I am the guest. As Derrida puts it, the host receives the guest, saying “in my language, which seems to assume that I am here *at home*, master of my home, that I receive you, invite, accept, or welcome you, allow you to come and pass the threshold, while saying to you ‘welcome’” (7). No hospitality without a host, and no host without the

declaration 'I am the host'. Insofar as Derrida deconstruct the necessity of the 'I' in hospitality, he proposes a wariness about the uncritical use of first-personal pronouns, such as 'I' and 'we'. We should pay special attention to exactly who is included – or welcomed – within (and who is not) any declaration about 'us': are 'we' actually hosts? Are we rather guests? Who is 'we'?

Across the rest of the sessions, Derrida draws out the ways in which unconditional and conditional hospitality reconstruct and distort this essential scene of encounter between the guest and the host. In the case of unconditional hospitality, which literally defines itself by its lack of conditions, open to anything, the host is defined by the power to welcome absolutely anyone and anything, such that whoever and whatever is welcomed never threatens the host's ownership of their home or their powers as host: "To be powerful, have power, be master or mistress of one's house [...] is to be capable of hospitality. This begins even with hospitality: whoever is incapable of hospitality has to recognize their own power" (39). Conversely, however, conditional hospitality – defined by the way it places requirements on the guest (to have the 'right paperwork', to bear the 'correct complexion') – *also* exercises a certain power, since it says to the guest "make yourself at home", but on the condition that you observe the rules of hospitality, that is to say, respect the being at home of my home, the being oneself of what I am" (23).

Derrida winds this play and counterplay of power and hospitality, conditionality and unconditionality, returning to and reflecting once again on concepts addressed elsewhere. For example, in the sixth session, Derrida reconstructs *Monolingualism of the Other's* long footnote on Hannah Arendt's interview in which Arendt situates herself 'at home' in her mother-tongue, German. Despite Arendt's lifelong concern with the rights of the exiled, Derrida finds her relationship with the German language to be tied up with some strikingly conservative notions about mother-tongues and motherlands (157-162). Reproducing these concerns, as well as returning, again, to Benveniste's etymological transformations of 'ipseity' and 'hospes' (47-51), the uncanniness of Freud (220-1), the Strangers of Plato and Sophocles (77-90), and more, Derrida extends and expands theoretical figures from across his oeuvre.

To the extent that nothing found here will radically reform our understanding of Derrida's Levinasian reading of Kantian hospitality, this is no limitation. Derrida's style of teaching – which is essentially reading – both elicits an extraordinary detail, a fascination with etymology, and a careful disregard for superficial interpretation, as well an overflowing knowledge of the tradition of Western philosophy, from Plato to Heidegger. Although this seminar text provides the notes which formed the basis of *Adieu* and *Of Hospitality*, this by no means entails a 'final reading' of Derrida on hospitality; on the contrary, this volume alone provides near-endless new routes of enquiry and research.

What might, nonetheless, be considered 'new' in Derrida's oeuvre is the attention to current events. Numerous seminars are opened and interspersed with references to the

ongoing Bosnian War, the latest xenophobic laws announced by the French government, protests Derrida will himself attend and petitions he will sign. In the age of globalisation, ethnic cleansing, enforcing of borders outside the EU, the rise of the French National Front and dramatic reductions in the right to asylum, Derrida introduces hospitality not only as a philosophical concept, but a hermeneutic response to his contemporary situation. If Derrida largely experienced the events 1968 by not being part of them, the Hospitality seminars reconstruct Derrida as an engaged intellectual, concerned with the world within which he thought.

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