

EXCERPT FROM:

“Strangeness, Hospitality, and Enmity”

Bernhard Waldenfels

Ruhr University

Boston College Fitzgibbons Lecture, February 13, 2009

.....

II. The Guest—the Stranger on the Threshold

The question at this point concerns how it has come about that what is strange or foreign has swung over into hostility [*Feindschaft*] both in individual, but more importantly in collective, consciousness. With this question I am approaching the detour related to the figure of the guest and the institution of hospitality. The guest unfolds as a transitional figure that invokes the *rites de passage*. As we shall see, the vocabulary used in the West to approach this figure is truly variable. For the Greeks, ξένος/ξένη means the stranger, but it also means the guest and the host.¹ It seems here that the guest, the one who comes from outside, embodies strangeness in a preeminent sense. In Latin we go a step further. Not only do we find here a linguistic affinity between *hostis* and *hospes*, but both can stand equally for the stranger as well as the guest and host (just as *hôte* in French and *ospite* in Italian). Moreover, the meaning of *hostis* expands to the point where it means enemy or opponent. From this point on it appears as if the stranger might be a potential enemy. Who comes first, however, the stranger, the guest, or the enemy? Obviously, this is not a simple matter of giving a definition or of taking a stand on the issue.

We return here to the matter at hand. Georg Simmel, in his celebrated study of the stranger,² describes the outsider as one who “arrives today and stays in the morning.” The author, himself an assimilated Jew (as one traditionally put it), leaves no doubt about the fact that the stranger violates the rules of normal hospitality when she or he stays. But what this brief text puts into question is precisely this assumption that such a state of normalcy exists. The stranger, as the “potential wanderer,” is certainly a “part of the group,” but a “part” of a totally different sort. She or he belongs to the group in a manner that includes “exteriority and opposition.” Even this *incomplete belonging*, this belong in not-belonging, denotes the status of a guest; one who stays in a strange house, in a strange state, and in a strange land, without truly belonging. The guest is at home in the other’s house.³ The guest dwells as the stranger on the threshold, neither truly inside nor

¹ Further support for this linguistic distinction in Greek can be found in my essay, “Das Phänomen des Fremden und seine Spuren in der klassischen griechischen Philosophie,” in B. Jostes, J. Trabant, editor, *Fremdes in fremden Sprachen* (München: W. Fink, 2001) and in Italian in *Fenomenologia dell’estraneità*, chapter VIII.

² See, *Soziologie*, Volume 11, *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt : Suhrkamp 1989) pp. 764-771.

³ In French one says, *L’hôte est chez soi chez l’autre*. The preposition, *chez*, is linked to the Latin word, *casa* (= hut).

truly outside. This fractured mode of belonging has corresponding spatial and temporal aspects. The guest is here and elsewhere; already there, where tomorrow or soon they will be. We recognize the unease that the guest, who is “on the edge,” brings, and we try to put an end to this suspended present that makes us so uncomfortable by saying things like: “Take your place” or “Make yourself comfortable.”

Hospitality is considered as a *para-institution*. It never stands on its own foundation but is grafted, rather, onto normal places: a family’s house, an ethnic community, the unoccupied places in a city, or the open ground of the countryside. At the same time, hospitality breaks free from normality so that in similar fashion it approaches as something of a parasite (παράσιτος) that has taken the food from the host’s table (σίτος).⁴ The guest would lose her or his special status should she or he become integrated into the host group. The guest receives steadily more as one becomes indebted to her or him. Insofar as hospitality is positioned only near what is normal, it equally departs from it. The guest is troublesome in the sense that Levinas generally speaks of the stranger and the other. If Derrida, following Levinas, insists that hospitality is unconditional, he is not speaking as a moralist but rather as a phenomenologist. For a hospitality that was subjected to specific preconditions would presuppose, incorrectly, that the guest who comes from outside could properly partake of the life of the group that she or he is visiting. This in no way should be taken to mean that there are no conditions of hospitality. For example, whoever receives another must own a place into which the guest can be invited and received. Still, it is quite right to say that hospitality is unconditioned and exceeds normal limits. Just as the stranger generally, the guest is either more than a normal group member or rather less—but never simply one among others.

In the end, it is quite astonishing, this gliding passage from the one who grants to the one who receives hospitality; something that often is directly deposited, as we have seen, in language (for example, in the Latin word, *hospes* and its derivatives). Émile Benveniste spells out this indeterminacy of meaning by noting that one gives to the foreign guest the same rights that were enjoyed by the Roman citizen with the expectation that Romans would be treated in a like manner when they sojourned in foreign lands.⁵ I certainly don’t believe that a legal or quasi-legal perspective will suffice to comprehend what is at play here. One must most of all take into account the fact that the host is no longer fully “master of her or his home,” insofar as the guest crosses the threshold that separates what belongs to the host from what is foreign. In a way, the host gives what she or he doesn’t have, insofar as what is proper and what belongs to her or him will be put into question by the demand of the stranger. This is why the figure of the guest signifies more than an ordinary institutional role. The figure of the guest appears as a preliminary shape of a radical strangeness that exceeds the limits of the fixed order. Hospitality constitutes a transitional phenomenon that no one can get past but which allows for many different responses. This permits us to suspect that the transformation of the stranger into the enemy has something to do with the rejection of the guest.

⁴ The normalizing and simultaneous degenerating of hospitality allows that the parasite can be more happily understood as a flatterer. It is called, therefore, in Greek also κόλαξ, that is, “flatterer”.

⁵ See, É. Benveniste, “Don et échange dans le vocabulaire indo-européen,” in *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard 1972).