



Comment

Response to Yarbakhsh Elisabeth. Reading Derrida in Tehran: Between an Open Door and an Empty *Sofreh*. *Humanities*, 2018, 7, 21

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Abstract: This critical engagement with Elisabeth Yarbakhsh's essay asks what Iran might be gaining from sustaining its particular form of (un-)hospitality. It considers whether Iranian dynamics of hospitality might be working to meet the specific political interests of the post-revolutionary "republic" and concludes with a comparison to classical Athenian migration (*metoikia*) politics.

Keywords: refugees; hospitality; Derrida; Afghans; Iran; metics

Afghans are the world's most numerous refugees and Iran is home to the second largest population of them. Yet, as Elisabeth Yarbakhsh observes in her essay in this issue, "Afghan refugees in Iran identify hospitality primarily by its absence" (Yarbakhsh 2018, p. 1). For Yarbakhsh, this predicament deserves some attention: A country that plays territorial "host" to millions of migrants fails to produce for its "guests" a lived experience of hospitality at the same time that it espouses a self-conception centered on, among other things, an excessive courteousness to strangers and an "open door" policy.

We soon learn that these commitments are part of a wishful Iranian self-conception. To make sense of the apparent contradiction that this vision helps sustain, however, Yarbakhsh turns to Jacques Derrida, who argues in *Of Hospitality* that hospitality (as absolute, universal, and utopian) is an ideal; on the ground, which is to say in political life, hospitality is always finite and conditional—it is actualized through practices of sorting and choosing (p. 3). To the extent that Yarbakhsh sets out to "juxtapose two hospitalities", which she calls "Iranian and Derridean" (p. 2), her essay aims to illustrate the power of Derrida's important insight that the limits attending every guest-host relationship do more than make "hospitality ... the exclusive domain of the state" (p. 3). They exercise and manifest its power.

The essay seems to take Iran as a stark and therefore illuminating example of the irresolvable contradiction Derrida sees between these two intertwined iterations of hospitality. I was for this reason surprised when Yarbakhsh concludes that the "Iranian experience leads us to ask how Derrida's 'pure hospitality', a "hospitality that imposes no conditions and asks no questions, might be sustained in practice, over decades of displacement" (p. 12). The question seems to signal a retreat from her earlier acknowledgment that, for Derrida, the "law" of (unconditional) hospitality cannot be inscribed as such. I raise the point here not to claim that Yarbakhsh fails to capture Derrida's argument—she frequently elucidates his complex position that unconditional hospitality is unrealizable—but to ask what is foreclosed when she backs away from it. Might the closing injunction that Iranians ought to act more hospitably to refugees come at the expense of a more critical engagement with the material she not only opens up but also begins to read diagnostically? What if the question were not so much whether Iran could sustain a pure hospitality but how it gains from sustaining its *particular* form of (un-)hospitality? Might the "multiple failures of Iranian hospitality over many decades" be successes in another sense? What if they serve not simply an ideal but also a *specific* and hierarchical status quo that pertains not only to Afghan migrants but also, if not chiefly, to Iranian citizens?

These are questions for which Yarbakhsh seems to lay some groundwork, and I want to try in these reflections to make them and their implications more explicit. Yarbakhsh maintains that Iranian hospitality constitutes a (disavowed) trope of Iranian nationalism that establishes “equality amongst Muslims” (p. 7). Although Khomeini dismissed nationalism as “a manifestation of ‘Euro-American culture,’” as Yarbakhsh explains, he championed an “Islamic community that extended across the region and beyond” (p. 8). As Yarbakhsh points out, “The rhetorical negation of borders acted to affirm the imaginary of the Iranian nation as Muslim, revolutionary and hospitable.” The notion of the open door thus has a strategic role to play. The openness that is presumed merely to express (rather than secure) the founding myth of a border-less Islamic community unfolds “against a backdrop of persistent hostility” (p. 11) that also, we should note, masks divisions *among* Muslims, divisions which Iran is deeply invested in maintaining.

It is therefore worth asking in what sense Iranian dynamics of hospitality might be working to meet the specific political interests of the post-revolutionary “republic”? Yarbakhsh’s discussion of the “prolonged exile” that Afghans experience might offer some clues (p. 12). In one regard, Yarbakhsh appears sanguine about the period of Afghan immigration to Iran in the early 1980s. “Khomeini threw open the doors to Afghans at a moment of crisis,” she writes, “revealing a level of hospitality that, as Khomeini’s successor, Ali Khamenei, notes, has rarely been emulated by the United States or Europe” (p. 12). But, she then adds, the hospitality extended at entry did not typically culminate in a practice of inclusive membership, even if de-privileged, for refugees.

The difference in state practices before and after arrival helps make visible and encode a distinction between arrival and integration or, perhaps better, between two types of movement, border crossing and immigration. What if the particularity of Iranian hospitality consists in maintaining a difference between visiting and residing? What if the distinction presumed between mobility and migration serves as a proxy for another set of more politically useful distinctions? The openness at the “border”, pursued in the name of a pan-Islamic identity, does a kind of double duty. For once it finds expression within the interior, it mutates into a strategy of inclusion-exclusion that marks the continued importance of *national* difference (i.e., Iranian over Afghan) even in an “Islamic Republic” that claims not only to elide but also to be defined against the “national”, as we saw earlier. But insofar as Iranians also constitute a citizenry, the state makes recourse to a definition of the people and to a membership criterion that privileges a notion of the “national” defined in terms of birth not religion.

When used to analyze the experience of *resident* foreigners (whether juridically recognized as such), we might say that the concept of hospitality, which stresses temporariness, obscures more than it illuminates. To put the same point differently, what strategic lines of thinking might the idea of hospitality be working to keep in place? “As a guest”, Yarbakhsh notes, after all, “the Afghan refugee is reimagined as a burden and remains constantly indebted: a hostage, to the Iranian host” (p. 12). The discomfort and hostility that pervades this relation has something to do with the instability that Derrida elaborates in his discussion of *Oedipus at Colonus* (Derrida 2000, pp. 6–7, 34–47, 93–121). The guest-host relation is inherently unstable. The host (Theseus) fears the guest (Oedipus) because the guest can outstay a welcome, which is to say, hold the host hostage. Within this frame, any arrival constitutes a potential or latent invasion; any “guest” a disallowed citizen.

The unstable distinction between a guest and a disallowed citizen emerges as a problem specifically (because) of settlement. In fifth-century BCE Athens, the context for *Oedipus*’s production, migrants and their native-born children were assigned to *metoikia*, a legal category of free non-citizenship. While the metic/citizen opposition illustrates the political importance of marking two kinds of foreigners (residents and visitors), it also functions to establish two ways of living in a polis. Even if we grant that *metoikia* exemplifies the “limits” of hospitality—the concept of hospitality (*xenia*) may better pertain to visitors and asylum seekers than migrants in Athens; highlighting the *residence* of foreigners, or metics, directs our attention to the problem of policing membership, not entry (on this, see further Kasimis 2018). Athenian democracy granted citizenship on the basis of dual Athenian parentage. Metics were excluded from full political membership intergenerationally. Not unlike the case of Iran’s

Afghan refugee, the metic's inclusion-exclusion works to entrench citizenship as an inheritable category, underscoring the importance of origins in the face of eroding socioeconomic barriers to inclusion.

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