

Foreign and Familiar

About: Michel Agier, *L'Étranger qui vient. Repenser l'hospitalité*, Seuil

By Camille de Vulpillières

The “migrant crisis” has prompted a welcoming response on the part of many citizens. While their initiatives alone cannot address the challenges posed by migration, the anthropologist Michel Agier draws upon these examples to define the principles of a hospitality policy worthy of its name.

The latest book by the anthropologist Michel Agier, senior research fellow at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and senior researcher at the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement stands out among the numerous books and essays addressing what is commonly called the “migrant crisis” by successfully combining two approaches that are too often applied separately: theoretical and conceptual analysis on the one hand, and empirical field research on the other.

The book focuses on the role played by hospitality, whatever the context in which it is offered. As the author points out, hospitality is a *response to a highly specific problem*, that posed by the arrival of a stranger (*étranger* in French) whose presence may prompt surprise and discomfort, and who may thus be rejected as an intruder. Through this notion of hospitality, Michel Agier draws together the two facets that characterise the *étranger*: the fact that his presence is always, to varying degrees, a test (for himself, but also—and this is the viewpoint primarily adopted here—for the community he enters), but that a measure of integration is nonetheless possible; a place can be found for him. The author’s approach is clear. From among the vast array of

known hospitality practices, he identifies the elements required to reinvent a modern form of hospitality, adapted to the problems of our societies today.

Hospitality today

The problem is presented from the outset in the form of a diagnosis: the border controls enacted by the European states in response to the “migrant crisis”, which the author prefers to see as a “crisis of the nation-states faced with mobility” (p. 10), have prompted numerous citizens and associations to counterbalance the official policies set in place by mobilising their own resources to welcome foreign migrants in a more or less improvised and essentially reactive manner. However, this return to private hospitality is more a symptom than a solution, signalling both dissatisfaction with state policies among a section of the population, and the unease of contemporary governments faced with the question of international mobility. However, given the scale of migration today, it cannot offer a satisfactory solution. It is rather “an ancient concept that is re-emerging, but as a furtive backlash, a question mark, a form of protest” (p.15), that points up the absence of any official—yet now indispensable—policy of hospitality, of which Michel Agier attempts to sketch the possible outlines.

“The *étranger* becomes my guest”

One of the main qualities of this book is to avoid aestheticising the notion of hospitality (its “sacralisation” writes Michel Agier, p. 30), an approach which often leads to very abstract developments, like those of Derrida who highlighted the unbridgeable gulf between the Law of hospitality, necessarily unconditional, and its practical implementation which presumes the existence of a home territory, and thus always betrays this ideal. Here, on the contrary, the author moves beyond the superficial consensus surrounding the notion to explore the practical tensions and problems raised not by hospitality *in general*, but by the actual practices through which it is expressed. He starts out from the *hospitality relationship* rather the concept itself. But he goes beyond a mere inventory of hospitality practices. It is in this respect that his chosen starting point, that of seeing hospitality as the response to a problem (how to see an *étranger* as my guest and not my enemy) is of particular value: it upholds the *necessity* of hospitality as a duty in the current context. This approach provides scope

for fruitful reflection based on Derridean ethics, which again anchors the question in practical reality: “what should we do with this conception of unconditional hospitality, what place does it occupy in a social and political anthropology of hospitality?” (p.29).

Anthropology and Hospitality, Past and Present

Midway between conceptual and empirical approaches, the author draws upon his field experience and his extensive anthropological research to identify “elementary forms” of hospitality (p.30). Its main features can be summarised as follows: hospitality has a sacred dimension, as asserted by Derrida, because it is a form of gift. Not a disinterested one, however, given the social prestige it affords to the person who offers it (Bourdieu, Pitt-Rivers). It is also a reciprocal relationship, in which each party has rights and duties, and an asymmetrical one, with the guest often being likened to a child (Pitt-Rivers, Gotman). Here we find a parallel with the contemporary questions surrounding hospitality. It is always limited in time, coming to an end when the guest either leaves or, on the contrary, enters the community, and always serves to make the *étranger* familiar (indeed it primarily concerns family members, in the broad sense). The extension of hospitality beyond the family circle takes place via intermediaries such as associations, religious communities, etc. who provide the link between host and guest. This is a far cry from the abstract figure of the perfectly anonymous and unknown *étranger*: the hospitality offered to this figure is just one of the latest historical avatars of the practice, that which corresponds to the actions of the Church and, more recently, the state. This takes us back to the original problem: with the demise of public and state hospitality, how, here and now, can I turn an *étranger* into my guest?

Hospitality is indeed making a comeback at individual, group and municipal levels. But it is always trying and problematic for the actors involved because “current practices reveal the efforts required to make up for the disappearance of the social structures that long provided a framework for these activities” (p. 57). Analysis of the initiatives detailed in Chapter 2 sheds light on the attempts to codify this emerging – or rather re-emerging – practice. The message is clear: these initiatives, whatever their form or their purpose, are insufficient to “respond effectively to the scale of migration across the world” (p. 67). Of course, community hospitality is a promising avenue, as an intermediate echelon between individuals and the state, but it remains embryonic, given its conflicting position with respect to the current state-centred political structure. Yet it should not be neglected: while a global state is unimaginable, the

global city is a real possibility, opening a potential route towards a new form of cosmopolitanism.

This notion of cosmopolitanism, as well-worn today as hospitality, is also seen as a response to a problem specific to each era, ours being that of unequal access to mobility. This explains why, among the thinkers mentioned, namely Simmel, Park and Kant, it is the last who most interests Michel Agier. His ambition, however, is to rethink visiting rights by removing them from the Kantian framework centred on states, whose geographical anchorage is a major obstacle. Pointing out that the Kantian cosmopolitical right, as a visiting right, has become a reality for a part of humankind, he identifies as a problem for our time the question of its political enactment, which consists precisely in determining its status with respect to the state. Despite the flurry of initiatives and demands surrounding the migration question, the very difficulty lies in the “lack of space in the national systems of thought and action to give meaning and efficacy to these movements” (p. 97). Moving beyond the state level, he thus embarks on a quest for evidence of the emergence of a “cosmopolitan condition, in the sense of an actual, daily and ordinary experience” (p. 104).

Rethinking the Image of the *Étranger*

The book then analyses this experience rendered unremarkable by globalisation and by the generalisation of communications and travel, of which the migrant, through his experience of crossing borders, represents “the forefront of an ordinary world taking shape” (p. 107). For this reason, his trajectory offers fertile ground for the anthropologist. Michel Agier defines four figures of the *étranger*, or rather four ways of “becoming an *étranger*” (title of the last chapter): arriving from elsewhere (the outsider); crossing a border (the foreigner) leaving one’s familiar world behind (the stranger); and being radically other (the alien). This leads us to two antithetical conclusions: we all belong, to some degree, to one or more of these categories; at the same time, governments have classified migrants as aliens, figures of extreme otherness who are inevitably rejected. The figure of the alien is identified by the author as the spectre behind current border policies. To eliminate this spectre, he must be integrated via one of the first three categories: free circulation, efforts to foster integration, greater knowledge and recognition of different cultures. Indeed, while the first three defined categories are naturally present in a relationship of hospitality, the last one, while nonetheless predominant in current political practices and

representations, is excluded; herein lies the reason behind the closing-off of nation states and the need to establish a hospitality *policy* for the modern era.

This typology of the *étranger* is one of the notable contributions of this book. Indeed, more than a “rethinking” of hospitality, as announced by the title, the author reworks the notion of *étranger*, highlighting the “axial position” he occupies today, and will occupy increasingly in the future. On the refounding of hospitality, the author’s thinking remains more programmatic than fully developed. He clearly identifies the problem and the challenges facing modern society, i.e. that of welcoming the *étranger* as a guest to avoid turning him into an alien or an enemy, but merely sketches out the possible responses, such as the idea, mentioned in the conclusion, of apprehending hospitality as a right rather than a duty. If it were an enforceable right, hospitality could no longer be seen as a “favour” (p. 141), as is the case today for both state border control policies and militant migrant reception initiatives. The author’s diagnostic and programmatic ambitions are fully achieved; a second book is now needed to deploy the responses that he outlines in the first.

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