Volume

Architecture of Peace
Reloaded

DPR Barcelona Nora Akawi Merve Bedir Killian Doherty Anthony Fontenot Dongsei Kim Tom Koenigs Nina Valerie Kolowratnik Aimal Maiwandl Timothy Moore Michael Murphy Jan Willem Petersen Posconflicto Laboratory Almin Pršić Francesca Recchia Ben Schokman Malkit Shoshan Vincent van Velsen Jacob Voorthuis

SEE The Good Cause exhibition inside
A VOCABULARY OF HOSPITALITY
Merve Bedir

Attitudes about refugees begin with the words we ascribe them. In Turkey – which has historically absorbed newcomers from a variety of outside conflicts – the term ‘guest’ is commonly used. Taking this as a starting point, Merve Bedir questions the laws of hospitality in Turkey, and the inherent hostility embedded in the word. She argues for a heightened understanding of the vocabulary around refugees, as a necessary first step to an improved refugee policy.

“...the foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated, the right to asylum, its limits, norms, policing, etc. He has to ask for hospitality in a language which, by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, ... This personage imposes on him translation into their own language, and that’s the first act of violence.”

Jacques Derrida, Of Hospitality

Until last year, Turkey’s regulations on refugees have partly referred to them as ‘guests’, implying that, in practice, Turkey is a transition country, and that the decisions of giving refugee status, repatriation, or relocating to a third country, belong to UNHCR. The word ‘guest’ comes from the same linguistic origin with the words host, ghost, hostile, hostage, hospitium, hospitality and describe the varieties of relationship between the host and the guest. The complexity inherent in this relationship includes several obligations and tensions: Why is the guest at the door? Where did he come from? What is his name; in fact, does he have a name, and how important is it for us to know his name? What does he want? Do I have to open the door? ... The responses to these questions determine the rules of hospitality.

The social, legal, and cultural insinuations of the words ‘host’ and ‘guest’ are essential to understanding the scope of this relationship, as Kant and Derrida have conceptualized in detail. The words ‘host’, ‘guest’, and their derivatives go back to the root ‘ghostis’ in Latin, meaning guest, stranger, and foreigner. The meaning of foreigner also includes that of enemy. The meaning of guest incorporates host or stranger, with an implication of hospitality and cure. The third meaning, hostage, reverses the hostility of the first, as the aggressiveness is defined in terms of the receiver, the victim. Derrida makes the remark that the host is sometimes the hostage, while Kant states that hospitality is a question of rights.

Because of Turkey’s ever-changing refugee policy in combination with the ambiguous legal context, not all groups of refugees have been treated in the same way by the state. Some of them have been warmly welcomed, while others should better leave as soon as possible. This difference in attitude also reflected itself in the cities where refugees settled including how they have interacted with the neighborhood inhabitants, other locals, other refugee groups and internal immigrants. The articulations of this relationship lead to an emergence of a diverse vocabulary regarding refugees in the Turkish language. This text is an attempt to start exploring this vocabulary, which reveals the ambiguous legal and political context of the intertwined [mis]conceptions related to ‘host’, ‘guest’ and ‘hospitality’, but also the rich social and cultural implications that the vocabulary inherits, particularly in Turkey.

The law of hospitality versus laws of hospitality
Questioning the rules of hospitality, Kant explains the contradiction between ‘the law of hospitality’ and ‘laws
of hospitality’ in his Perpetual Peace. By asking the foreigner their name, they are enjoined to the state, which guarantees their identity, and provides them the rights to reside. They become legally responsible persons, hence the subject of it (laws of hospitality). Whereas hospitium, as the divine right of the guest and the divine duty of the host, means to open one’s home and let guests arrive, without asking who they are (the law of hospitality). Hospitium may be considered as a moral definition, although it existed as part of law in the Greek city states. Derrida’s reading on the difference between the law of hospitality and laws of hospitality is a more hierarchical one: The law is above and outside laws; thus, it is illegal, like a lawless law. In order to be what it is, the law needs laws, but then denies them, threatens them and sometimes corrupts them. It is the law, within and outside laws, that sustains itself, and it must always be able to do this. Departing from this point, referring to refugees as guests in Turkey, strengthens the paradox of ‘the law of hospitality’ and ‘laws of hospitality’. Between experiencing hospitality and hostage, this ambiguity leaves them in a completely vulnerable position against the state, which is also foreign to them.

A vocabulary of hospitality

According to Derrida, language is where the question of hospitality begins: “Must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language, in all the senses of this term, in all its possible extensions, before being able and so as to be able to welcome him into our country? If he was already speaking our language, with all that implies, if we already shared everything that is shared with the language, would the foreigner be a foreigner and could we speak of asylum or hospitality in regard to him? This is the paradox.” The language we use to communicate with the foreigner, and the values, meanings, culture that come with it, do not belong to the foreigner. Derrida claims that the moment we address the foreigners in our own language is when we start to establish our sovereignty on them.

In Turkey, different words are used, legally and in everyday language, to refer to the refugees from different periods and major events. The refugees that came to Turkey between 1912 and 1930 are called muhacir. In the cities they settled, they are named as macir or mahcir, which is actually an articulated pronunciation of muhacir, but this way it is told to be perceived less exclusive among public. Even more specifically, the refugees of the First World War are known as mubadil. The ones that fled from the Greek islands call themselves ‘from-the-island’. These groups have Turkish origin and were directly accepted as Turkish citizens. In the regulations, the European refugees, who match the definition of UNHCR’s 1951 Refugee Convention are named as mütceci [refugee], the non Europeans as sigınmacı [asylum seeker]. This regulation, later on in its different sections, refers to refugee or asylum seeker as misafir [guest] and yabanç [foreigner]. The people with no connections to any state are referred as yurtsız [stateless], and haymatloz is the name used for the people who escaped from German-speaking countries between 1937 and 1945. Chechens who fled to Turkey after 1994 are accepted as in ‘refugee-like situation’ by UNHCR.

The name given to a detention center in Istanbul, yabancılar misafirhanesi [foreigners guesthouse], contains the meanings of enemy versus hostage and parasite versus guest, collectively. The question of guest or foreigner is about border, territory and sovereignty, which define one’s home. I am the master and protector at home, so I can receive anybody I want as my guest. In the case of a nation, the sense of protecting one’s home could go as far as xenophobia. Anyone who becomes a threat to my sovereignty at home, I would start to see as an enemy. This makes them hostile, and I start to run the risk of being a hostage. Also, a guest, without the right to hospitality or asylum, can become a parasite, a guest who is illegitimate, liable to exile or arrest.

Unlike hospitium [absolute hospitality], laws of hospitality require a contract between the law and the refugee. Here, the ‘contract of hospitality’ is not only a question of nationality/birth/family name for the foreigner, but also it is the assurance of remaining foreign for the rest of their life, and that of their descendants’. In this sense, the ambiguous context in Turkey gives way to the establishment of diverse social and economical relationships between the refugees and the locals. For instance, the ‘hostel contracts’ in Aksaray, Istanbul provide a great variety of lengths and rules of housing available in this neighborhood, and display how the local economy benefits from the ambiguity of the legal context. The transition-centered policies and the ambiguity of the legal context lets a diverse network of informality and maybe illegality to appear within the notion of hospitality and refugees. These networks are worth exploring further and could be included in our ‘Vocabulary of Hospitality’.

The new law on refugees in Turkey was introduced in 2013. It was prepared in an effort to properly formalize the legal framework of hospitality. The Vocabulary of Hospitality will continue to expand displaying the challenges of adaptation to this new law on refugees.

2 In this text, refugee is used in the meaning stated by UNHCR’s ‘1951 Refugee Convention’: someone who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” The only regulation on refugees in Turkey was introduced in 1994. Syrian refugees that fled to Turkey since 2011 are named as ‘guests’ by the government, their status is regulated directly by the government organizations, but only in part by the laws.
4 Turkey sees itself as a transition country. Refugees are given temporary asylum and hosted until they are repatriated or sent to a third country. During this procedure, refugees settle in 36 different ‘satellite cities’. Officially, there are no limitations to where they can stay within these cities, only they need to report their presence in their city to the state officials, frequently.