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Ethics, hospitality & intervention in Libya

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GIDEON BAKER, APR 12 2011

For Jacques Derrida, hospitality is ethics entire. This may well be the case. Yet the rights and wrongs of intervening in Libya (or anywhere else for that matter) from the standpoint of the ethics of hospitality are complicated, not simple. Who is the host to whom interveners show inhospitality? Is it Gaddafi? This way of putting the question reminds us that who gets to play host is always ultimately arbitrary, or worse: winning the right to be a host in the international system takes a lot of violence. But what if we see the host in this case as the 'Arab nation' or the Umma of those faithful to the Prophet Muhammad (a community already wary of western inhospitality, and for good reason)? Pushing hosting to its humanist limit case – humanity at large – hardly solves the problem either. As Carl Schmitt argued (*The Concept of the Political*), invoking humanity risks denying the enemy even the quality of being human such that the utmost inhumanity can be deployed in defeating him. A global order based on 'the human' as a normative ideal would be a very inhospitable place indeed for all sorts of people.

These complexities of intervention have led me to speculate that the ethics of hospitality can only establish the limits beyond which intervention or non-intervention threatens the very possibility of hospitality itself. Everything that falls between these limits remains to be decided (as, of course, does a judgment of where these limits lie in any given case). These limits are, first, global domestication (whether in the name of humanity or any other supposed identity). An ethics linked to extensive interventions with the telos of a world in which nothing is foreign is a very inhospitable thing indeed. The welcome can be made only when there remains an outside to the home; if everywhere is home then the 'welcome' cannot be refused, just as the highwayman's 'your money or your life' offers no real choice either. Put another way: without the foreigner there can be no hospitality, so to the extent that intervention denies foreignness and claims everywhere as home, it is at odds with an ethics of hospitality. However, it is important to understand that the foreigner in hospitality is not necessarily somebody with a different nationality but he or she who is foreign to our order, whatever that might be. In other words, foreignness is larger and more enduring than the divisions of international order and an ethics of hospitality would not defend state sovereignty so much as critique any domesticating impulse (including that enacted in the name of 'humanity') whatsoever.

The second limit set by the ethics of hospitality to intervention is that an ethic of hard-core (say pacifistic) non-intervention seems incompatible with hospitality, too. If hospitality is the welcome of the foreigner that comes, then it cannot insulate itself from concern with who gets to come and who doesn't. What sort of hospitality would open its door only to those who can crawl far enough, and who remain strong enough, to knock, meanwhile ignoring those being attacked just beyond the threshold? And of course if there is no moral difference in this case, neither is there when national borders are at stake. In short, in something like 'supreme humanitarian emergencies', when would-be guests cannot seek the hospitality they need and desire, intervention seems not only compatible with but called for by an ethics of hospitality.

In Libya, as in all concrete cases, whether these limits are at issue is always to be decided. Is the bombing of Gaddafi's forces driven by a logic of global biopoliticisation that is making sovereignty and intervention synonyms rather than antonyms (as David Chandler argued recently on this site)? If so, then we would perhaps have recourse to critique its inhospitality in terms of overstepping this first limit: that of the domestication of everything and everyone that is foreign. On the other hand, what fate would have awaited the citizens of Benghazi if a non-interventionist stance had been adopted? This might have involved stepping beyond the second limit set by an ethics of hospitality: that of privileging those who come over those that would but cannot.

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This 'to be decided' quality of all hospitality-based decisions on intervention does not make it a relativistic ethics. Hospitality always mandates a welcome, but the question of who to welcome, and what the welcome involves, cannot be answered in advance. If welcoming was a matter of pre-determined knowledge then hosts would not be hosts and their 'welcome' would be worthless. Only deciding on the welcome constitutes the host as host and makes his or her welcome meaningful. But, as the flip side of this, the host cannot find his or her identity without the coming of the foreigner, and this is where the radical thrust of an ethics of hospitality lies. It starts not with us, but with that which is foreign to us. Though 'we' can always refuse to welcome, it is only welcoming that provides 'us' with an identity at all.

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Gideon Baker is Associate Professor in Politics and International Relations at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia.