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The "foreigner-host". Revisiting Cacciari's "the common" in the Context of Migration[1]

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Abstract

This paper explores the philosophical and theological dimensions of human migration and foreignness, situating the discussion within contemporary debates on community and "the common." Drawing on Massimo Cacciari's interrogation of the "foreigner" and the hostis-hospes dynamic, the study examines how modern migration challenges traditional conceptions of communal belonging and identity. The analysis traces the evolution of the "common" from Tönnies' distinction between society and community to post-Nietzschean critiques that emphasize relationality and the inherent presence of the "other." Through Cacciari's reading of biblical and classical sources, particularly the figure of the Theós xénos (foreign god) in the Gospel of Matthew, the paper highlights the paradoxical role of the foreigner as both guest and host. The discussion integrates Jewish and Christian scriptural traditions to underscore hospitality, exile, and ethical responsibility towards the stranger, ultimately arguing for a reimagined, inclusive understanding of community in an era of mass displacement.

Keywords: Foreign God; Migrations; Community; Hospitality; Exile; Massimo Cacciari

Introduction

Human mobility and migration are phenomena that are as old as humanity itself. Yet, in contemporary times, the profoundly dramatic circumstances of and related to these phenomena, and their attendant ramifications for communal existence ("life in common") within the framework of sovereign modern nation-states, have distinctly conditioned both the modalities and perceptions of migration. To cite just one piece of data, the annual report of the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC 2023) states that during 2022, a record 32.6 million people were displaced due to climate and environmental disasters, and 28.3 million due to conflict and violence. This represents a 60% increase in numbers from 2021. In the face of this multifaceted, complex, and,

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above all, painful reality, I seek to offer a concise contribution within the ongoing dialogue between philosophy and theology.

First, I situate this dialogue between philosophy and theology, and their potential for mutual enrichment within the context of contemporary theoretical developments that interrogate the nature of "the common" and the concept of "community". I will then foreground certain considerations concerning the notion of the "foreigner" as articulated in the thought of the Italian philosopher and public intellectual Massimo Cacciari. The "foreigner", of course, is the person one is confronted with when one analyses the issue of migration. Cacciari, who at one time also served as mayor of Venice, offers a philosophical interrogation of the concept of "the common," specifically through the lens of the category of the foreigner, thereby establishing provocative points of dialogue with Christian theological traditions. Finally, I integrate theological perspectives to deepen the analysis of the so-called 'foreigner paradox' as articulated by Cacciari, concluding with brief final reflections.

A negative community

German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies' late nineteenth-century characterisation of society and community in terms of opposition is commonplace (Tönnies 1922; cf. Cragnolini 2008:52). According to Tönnies, society is an artificial construct, governed via legal mechanisms, in contrast to the purported naturalness of relationships constitutive of community. The latter is marked by voluntary associations rooted in affective commitment among its members – societal bonds are rendered anonymous and artificial. While "coldness" and "distance" characterise societal bonding, warmth and closeness are constituent features of the community bonds that transcend the legal spheres of law. According to this perspective, community implies something "common", something that is shared (for example, blood or soil), it is something that is one's own, and it is, in turn, constitutive of one's identity that gives one a sense of belonging and permanence in the face of social changes.

The above conception of communal life, however, has been critically interrogated by contemporary, non-political communitarian thinkers emerging in the (post-) Nietzschean era. These theorists reject the notion that community is the property or an attribute belonging to or inhering in the subjects it unites; rather, they assert, in the words of Esposito (2007:21), that "there is nothing in common." The concept of "the common" as one's own identity (together with its historical developments into various forms of violence) is problematised by these approaches, which highlight the impossibility of positing any determinate foundation or ultimate purpose *(télos)* of community. Hence the "negative" character often attributed to this stream of thought[2], while nevertheless stressing that our nature is always communitarian. The social or common is not an instance juxtaposed to our way of being, but we are already and always "another", our paths are crossed by the "other" that contaminates our alleged selfhood with otherness, difference, and monstrosity *(das Unheimliche)* (Cragnolini 2009:21).

With all of their nuances, the above (communitarian) ways in which "community" is perceived are critical of the perspective of modernity with the idea of subject-individual-

[2] Scholars in this group include, besides Cacciari, also the likes of Agamben, Nancy, Bataille, Blanchot, Derrida and Espósito.

owner as its center. As such, reflections on "the common" that the former articulate are articulated in categories that are largely foreign to discourse in modern sociology, which, grounded in its own distinct conceptual apparatus, is frequently labeled "anti-communitarian" by proponents of communitarianism. However, it should be emphasised that amidst the differences, nuances and emphases of each, all these authors within the non-political communitarian tradition share the conviction that existence is fundamentally "being-with", and that this relationality precedes any formation of individual identity (Cragnolini 2008:58).

It is in the itinerary of a reflection shaped by this notion that the category of "foreigner" is introduced into the thinking about the common, which is linked, at the same time, to that of "exile". This view, which initially, or from a certain matrix of modern sociology, seems "strange" or "alien" to a reflection on the community, becomes, on the contrary, a fruitful possibility of understanding our way of being.

The foreigner in the *hostis-hospes* dynamic

Like his colleagues, philosophers Jean Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben, Cacciari engaged in sustained reflection on the phenomena of exile and foreignness. Their reflections have been published in the journal *Archipiélago* (1996, no. 26 &27) as parts of contributions to a conference on the theme of exile (Cacciari 1996).

For Cacciari, the history of the twentieth century[3] is characterised as "the history of the progressive end of any space of cohabitation" (Cacciari 1996:17).[4] The disappearance of spaces of coexistence has been accompanied by the appearance of many small centripetal universes shaped as a conflicting multiplicity. This monadic proliferation as the modern balance of the romantic-political claims of totality leads Cacciari to begin his contribution to the abovementioned conference with the statement that "there is an increasingly marked split between the figure of the exile and the language of welcome and hospitality" (1996:17). It is important, in this regard, to trace back the original meaning of the terms *hospes* and *hostis*. *Hospes* refers to the person who practices hospitality, welcoming the stranger, the one who comes. *Hostis* does not have, as it is usually translated, the sense of an enemy but, rather, that of something close to friendship, in the same way as the Greek *xénos*.[5] *Hostis* is a term linked to hospitality and welcome with the added value of reciprocity. Therefore, Cacciari affirms that:

> [i]t is the same reciprocity of *hostis* and *hospes* (...). *Hostis* is the foreign pilgrim, and *hospes* the one who receives and welcomes him or her. *Hostis*, like the Greek *xénos*, originally does not mean *inimicus, perduellis, or echthrós* (enemy). *Xénos,* rather, appears in many contexts closely akin to *phílos*: thus, to be an enemy of the stranger *(echtroxénos)* is a guilt equated with not caring for the gods *(Seven Against Thebes)*. Nor does hospitality give rise to any assimilatory process: the *hostis, the*

[3] One does, however, wonder whether Cacciari's reference here to such a "generic" history of the 20th century may not be more accurately described as the "European" history of the 20th century.

[4] This progressive disappearance of "any space of cohabitation" is related to forms of totalitarianism that emerged in 20th century, such as Nazism. After all, asks Cesare (2019:280), "What is left of hitlerism? The idea that it is possible to choose with whom to cohabit."

[5] This line of argumentation is developed by Cacciari in his *El Archipiélago. Figuras del otro en Occidente.* (See Cacciari 1999:39)

> *xénos*, is sacred precisely in his or her other identity and individuality with respect to that of the host. And the guest, on the other hand, is always also *hostis*, is always in the condition of becoming, in turn, a wayfarer ("un caminante") and in need of hospitality. In the *hospes* always lives the *hostis*, and vice versa. They are two dynamics that intertwine, not two states. (Cacciari 1999:40) [my translation – EMS]

The dynamic between the *hostis* and *hospes* is one that traverses the subject and configures him or her in his or her condition, as *hospes* and *hostis*, being a host and a stranger. The conjunction "and" is significant, for in being *hospes*, one simultaneously recognises oneself as *hostis*, and vice versa. The *hospes* is always already traversed by the foreigner, the pilgrim (a figure that Cacciari also briefly refers to) and vice versa. The pilgrim (*hostis*) who lives the experience of exile is perhaps an itinerant figure who has left behind his or her land (foundation) but with the hope of returning. In the foreigner's experience, this hope is lived as some form of pain that finds the possibility of relief, however fleeting, in hospitality (*hospes*).

In this constellation of language where guest, foreigner, exodus and exile intersect and become entangled, Cacciari highlights a clue "to get out of the tangle" (1996:19): the *theós xénos*, the foreign god. This particular reference is to the biblical God. In this tradition, God is a foreigner not only – and not so much – because of God's protecting, assisting and watching over the integrity of the foreigner (something Zeus did), but because Godself is a foreigner. Here the Italian philosopher quotes a phrase from the New Testament as follows: "*Xenos* I was, I was a stranger, and you welcomed me". The text that frames the phrase is the so-called "final judgment" passage from the Gospel of Matthew, which has a revelatory function. With this revelation, the veil is removed from the opacity of the historical condition, and it allows, at the end of time, to see clearly that which seems to have been hidden in the mutations of time. It is worth quoting the complete text:

> When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did

> not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.[6] (Mt 25:31–46)

The phrase that Cacciari quotes is from verse 35, which in the present translation reads: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." This is certainly a more accurate translation. The use of the imperfect of the verb *eimí* (to be – being) admits the translation to "I was being" a foreigner. This adds a nuance of meaning to be emphasised since it links to what Cacciari says in relation to the dynamic of the *hostis/hospes*. By this, I mean that "being" a foreigner conveys a sense of reversible circumstantiality, which is confirmed in the text itself. For the one who affirms that "he/she was being" (*hostis*) is the same one who receives (*hospes*) when he affirms "come, blessed of my Father".

The passage from the Gospel of Matthew reveals the multiple modalities under which God (Christ) made Godself present in history: as hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, as a prisoner and a foreigner. "It is no longer a question of Zeus who welcomes foreigners: it is we who welcome the foreign God" (Cacciari 1996:19). This foreign God, who is neither hosted nor asks to be hosted, is the one who, in the text, offers hospitality. This paradoxical figure is that of the God who, as a foreigner, is "the one who gives hospitality, the foreigner who hosts" (Cacciari 1996:19).

> For this foreigner to be entirely a host, he must be entirely a foreigner in the world; the one who empties himself/herself of all worldly possessions, who gives himself/herself completely in exile, entirely a foreigner in the world, entirely in exile and entirely a host, entirely capable of giving himself/herself as an exile, is the most hospitable. (Cacciari 1996:20)

According to the text quoted from the Gospel of Matthew, the foreign God has multiple identities. As already mentioned, he is not only a foreigner but also the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and imprisoned.[7] These are figures that refer to God's total dispossession and that characterise God as completely foreign and exiled in the world, although, by that same disposition and at that moment, as entirely hospitable.

In relation to the latter – although Cacciari does not refer to it explicitly – and following this theological line of argumentation, the text of the Letter of St. Paul to the Philippians resonates. In the latter, quoting an ancient hymn from the Christian liturgy, the apostle to the gentiles refers to the *kenosis* (self-emptying) of Jesus Christ to describe the incarnation and salvation. The latter may be characterised as the movement by which God becomes *hostis/hospes*. The paradox is radicalised, since the God who completely

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[6] Translation from the Spanish version *La Biblia. Libro del Pueblo de Dios*, Verbo Divino, Estella (Navarra), 2005.

[7] The characterisation as hungry, thirsty, naked and sick connotes the absolute dispossession of the necessities of life, and the condition of being a prisoner refers to an expulsion to a place "outside" of the community or the world.

exiles himself by going beyond the frontiers of life itself (Php 2:8 “death on the cross”) is the one who welcomes, who receives, who says "come" (Mt 25:34), who “saves”.

Roots of *Theós xénos*

The theological tradition of the foreign God *(Theós xénos)*, as found in the passage of Mt 25:31ff, is a distinctively Christian development. However, this concept is not without antecedent; it is preceded by a tradition of Jewish origin that significantly informed the theological elaboration of the Theós xénos within Christianity.

The Hebrew Bible employs various terms to designate foreigners, most notably *ger* and *toshab*.[8] Biblical law addresses the status of foreigners residing within Israel, with multiple legal codes instituting provisions to safeguard against their exploitation and distress (cf. Auza 1994:83–100).

The Israelites’ self-understanding as God’s chosen people is rooted in their experience of liberation from Egyptian bondage. Having themselves endured the condition of foreignness and servitude, the people of Israel enshrined prescriptions concerning the treatment of foreigners within the context of the Sinai covenant, particularly in Exodus 20–24 (the “Code of the Covenant”). This corpus represents one of the earliest legal frameworks in which the treatment of foreigners is codified, drawing explicitly upon Israel’s own historical experience as aliens in a land of slavery. The injunction to avoid the repetition of such suffering for others is inextricably linked to the Israelites’ memory of God’s attentiveness to the cries of the vulnerable and marginalised. The Exodus legislation articulates this principle, for example, by saying that “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien (*ger*), for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan” (Ex 22:21–22) and “You shall not oppress a resident alien (*ger*); you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Ex 23:9). Furthermore, the Sabbath law is extended to include foreigners: “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest so that your ox and your donkey may have relief and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed” (Ex 23:12).

Subsequent Deuteronomistic legislation continues and elaborates this trajectory: “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset” (Dt 24, 14–15); “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt” (Dt 24:17–18). The protection of foreigners is further reinforced by a liturgical curse against transgressors: “‘Cursed be anyone who deprives an alien, an orphan, or a widow of justice.’ All the people shall say, ‘Amen!’” (Dt 27:19).

The priestly code in Leviticus also regulates the treatment of foreigners, stipulating, for example, that gleanings from the harvest be left for the poor and the foreigner (Lv 19:9–10; 23:22). The commandment to love the stranger is parallel to the injunction to love one’s neighbor: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Lv 19:34).

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[8] According to De Vaux (1992:117), the term *ger* is used before the Babylonian exile and *toshab* after it, describing a type of foreigner less assimilated into Jewish culture.

However, this frame of reference for the theological consideration of the foreigner in ancient Israel is not necessarily without exceptions. Following the return from exile, Ezra and Nehemiah undertook measures to expel foreigners and even compelled Israelites married to foreigners to divorce them. This so-called "reformation" occurred in the context of the post-exilic restoration (circa 536 BCE), a period in which Israel lost three fundamental elements of its identity: its land, temple, and monarchy. These ended, but the experience of exile did not sufficiently transform Israel's collective identity such that, upon their return, they could fully embrace the stranger as *hospes*.

It also was at this time, the time of the Second Temple, that the defining features of Judaism as it would be encountered in the time of Jesus were established. In this first-century Palestinian milieu, the Lucan account of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30–37) challenges the prevailing view of the *hostis* as enemy, reasserting the intrinsic connection between *hostis* and *hospes.* In Cacciari's terms, the Good Samaritan – regarded by many Jews as an enemy – becomes the neighbor who demonstrates compassion, thereby embodying the paradoxical relationship between *hostis* and *hospes*.

Sequels of *Theós xénos*

As previously noted, the Old Testament provides the substratum for the New Testament's theology of the foreigner, which introduces two novel characteristics.

The first, in order of theological relevance and following Cacciari, is the radicalisation of "the paradox of the stranger" in the figure of the *Theós xénos*. This theological development is unprecedented in its explicitness in the Hebrew scriptures. The doctrine of the incarnation is thus reframed as God's actual presence in history – not only in the singular historical person of Jesus of Nazareth but also in every dispossessed or expelled individual. The hymn quoted by St Paul in the Letter to the Philippians tells of the dynamics of the kenotic coming into the world of the *Theós xénos,* who, by being nailed to a cross, is stripped of life and expelled from the world of the living. In every marginalised person (Mt 25:35), the *Theós xénos* is manifested as *Deus revelatus atque absconditus sub specie contrarii.* The God who "is and who was, and who is to come" (Rev 1:8) is encountered in the person of the outcast, revealing a divine identity that is perpetually estranged and alienated by otherness that cannot be appropriated.

Second, the Christian way of life is conceived as a condition of foreignness or exile in this world. This motif is rooted in the New Testament but attains fuller expression in the post-apostolic and early patristic periods (cf. Aguirre, 1021:99–123).[9] When the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, for example, describes the forefathers in the faith, he says that "they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Heb 11:13). James addresses his audience as "inhabitants of the diaspora" (Jm 1:10) and Peter exhorts Christians as aliens and exiles" (1 Pt 2:11). This exilic self-understanding endows the Christian community with a pilgrim identity, oriented toward a heavenly homeland. As Paul states: "Our citizenship is in heaven" (Php 3:20); "So we are always confident, even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Co 5:6–7).

[9] The pages correspond to the fifth chapter of the work ("The Stranger in Early Christianity") which is of value for an understanding of the universal and inclusive character of early Christianity and its relationship to the practice of hospitality. "Hospitality is connected from the beginning with the idea of Christians as resident foreigners, 'without papers' ... whose true homeland is heaven." (Rivas 2011:81)

Both theological trajectories persist into the present – both that of the *Theós xénos* pointed out by Cacciari and that of the Christian as an inhabitant in "exile", as a foreigner in the world. In Christianity, monastic communities exemplified the convergence of these themes, with the *fuga mundi* ("flight from the world") constituting a form of life in exile, understood as an "integral and unceasing liturgy" (Agamben, 2012:8). In this sense, the role of the popular Christian monastic prayer the *Salve Regina*[10]*,* for instance, articulates the Christian's self-identification as "exiled sons of Eve" *(exules filii Evae)* who sigh, groan and weep "in this valley of tears" (*in hac lacrimarum valle*), who long to see Jesus "after this exile" *(post hoc exsilium)* and who long for the end of their earthly exile. From this perspective, the exilic configuration of Christian existence serves as a mediating principle "that guarantees that expropriation ends up being reconverted into appropriation", a mediating principle that transforms expropriation into appropriation (Nancy 2009:116–118).

The monastic community, as described in the Rule of St. Benedict, reflects Cacciari's dialectic of *hostis/hospes*. The community, which daily recites the *Salve Regina*, also pledges hospitality to the stranger:

> Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for He is going to say, "I came as a guest, and you received Me." And to all let due honor be shown, especially to the domestics of the faith and to pilgrims. As soon as a guest is announced, therefore, let the Superior or the brethren meet him with all charitable service. … In the reception of the poor and of pilgrims the greatest care and solicitude should be shown, because it is especially in them that Christ is received" (Rule of St. Benedict 53:1–3, 15).

The Rule's invocation of the Matthean pericope underscores the centrality of the *Theós xénos* to the communal monastic life, which is shaped by the paradoxical interplay of *hostis* and *hospes*. In Cacciari's formulation, the monastic community constitutes a locus *(ubi)* where "in the *hospes* always lives the *hostis*, and vice versa" (Cacciari 1999:40), a dynamic that structures the community's ethos.

Conclusion

The *hostis-hospes* community represents a dynamic that reconfigures social conceptions of identity and property, opening the possibility of an "impossible politics" of unconditioned hospitality, as theorised by Jacques Derrida:

> (…) absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even

[10] Although attributed to several authors, the origin of this popular Christian prayer is uncertain. What is known is that, in 1250, Gregory IX approved it and required it be sung at the end of Compline, the liturgy prayed by monks at the end of each day. It is sung this way and at this service to this day [at least this is my experience, having lived this way in and having frequented the Benedictine Monastery of Santa María de Los Toldos, in Gral. Viamonte, Buenos Aires.

> their names. The law of absolute hospitality commands a break with hospitality by right, with law or justice as rights. (Derrida 2000:31)

However, the contemporary Anthropocene has witnessed an intensification of human mobility and a concomitant sense of permanent exile, driven by extractive and appropriative processes. The modern subject's insistence on identity and selfhood stands in stark contrast to the foreignness and alterity of the exiled other, resulting in increased dread and rejection, particularly as the foreigner's marginality deepens.

At this juncture, one must ask: Is there any possibility of overcoming the "increasingly marked split between the figure of the exile and the language of welcome and hospitality" (Cacciari)? If so, how might this breach be rendered livable? Can new spaces *(ubi)* of coexistence and unconditioned hospitality be imagined today, modeled on the monastic tradition? Can such hospitality be envisioned as a viable form of common life for the *hostis-hospes*?

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