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► **To cite this version:**

Bernard Scheou. Hospitality social networks: The end of tourism or realization of the tourist's search for authenticity?. *Tourism Imaginaries*, University of California, Feb 2011, Berkeley, United States. hal-03438144

HAL Id: hal-03438144

<https://hal.science/hal-03438144>

Submitted on 23 Nov 2021

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Hospitality social networks: The end of tourism or realization of the tourists' search for authenticity?

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Abstract

What is the meaning of the practices arising from social networks of hospitality that emerged at the beginning of the 21th century? Can we consider it as a resurgence of hospitality as in the original sense of the word? Can these new practices be read as the search for a redefined and more intense experience of otherness, for the welcome of others, for a movement towards Derrida's unconditional hospitality? Or are their motives focused on personal and more "egocentric" needs, such as the economical asset of being hosted for free, the opportunity to experiencing authentic emotions, develop emotionally, or break out of isolation?

Keywords

Hospitality, Couchsurfing, Encounters, Authenticity, Derrida.

Résumé

Quel sens donner aux pratiques qui découlent des réseaux sociaux d'hospitalité, apparus au début du 21^{ème} siècle ? Peut-on les envisager comme une résurgence de l'hospitalité antique ? Peuvent-elles être lues comme la recherche d'une expérience redéfinie et plus intense de l'altérité, de l'accueil de l'autre, d'un mouvement en direction de l'hospitalité inconditionnelle de Derrida ? Ou leurs motivations sont-elles plutôt centrées sur la satisfaction de besoins personnels et plus « égocentrés » : être hébergé gratuitement, vivre des expériences et des émotions « authentiques », s'épanouir, rompre la solitude,... ?

Mots clés

Hospitalité, Couchsurfing, Rencontre, Authenticité, Derrida

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I. Introduction

Since 2000, new social networks of hospitality appeared, as descendants of Servas, an organization created in Europe after the Second World War as a pacifist movement for reconciliation between peoples through the hospitality. These networks enable their members to find a host by contacting others members. Hosting is gratis and reciprocal reception is not obligatory. Some of these networks, such as CouchSurfing, are experiencing phenomenal success.

What is the meaning of this success? How to read and understand those emerging practices that challenge the definition of the tourism from its margins? Can we consider them to be a resurgence of antique hospitality, as in the original sense of the word? Can they be read as the pursuit of a more intense experience of otherness? Or else, as a nascent movement toward the unconditional hospitality of Derrida? Or, are the motivations of the users focused instead on meeting personal needs through a new form of free consumption of leisure and tourism, specific to the present time: to be hosted for free, to live genuine experiences and feel authentic emotions, to thrive, to break out of isolation, or to satisfy a narcissistic need for personal staging?

We would like to answer these questions through an analysis of different appreciations and motivations as expressed by members of CouchSurfing, the most significant hospitality social network judging by its sheer size.

We chose CouchSurfing as a target of research for several reasons: first, because of our familiarity with the network. We have been members since 2007, and have served as volunteers for nearly two years at a local level; second, it has experienced the most spectacular increase of users, finally, it has been the subject of a master's thesis in social psychology (Bialski, 2007), whose French translation was published under the title "Intimate Tourism" (Bialski, 2009). In this excellent thesis, the author relied on three sources: a) twenty "ethnographic" interviews conducted with the network founders and most involved members (who met in Montreal to restart the network after a computer problem during the summer in 2006); b) an online survey about "CouchSurfing friendships" which was answered by 3,000 people; and finally c) 56,000 anonymous profiles provided by the management team. While she interviewed people involved in the direction of the network, we wanted to complete her work through qualitative interviews conducted in the small French town of Perpignan in 2009 and 2010 (See Appendix 1 for more detail about the methodology).

Let us start by looking the meaning of the word “hospitality”. In the Anglo-Saxon academic world, the vast majority of publications on hospitality relate to management and business and use the term “hospitality” to describe the commercial and economic activity of tourist reception.

But since the 2000s, several editorial initiatives chose to broaden the perspective on hospitality by integrating the different dimensions: historical, anthropological, sociological, economic, etc. As an example, we quote collective works (Lashley & Morrison, 2000 et Molz & Gibson, 2007a), or the recent creation of “Hospitality & Society”, a journal which specifically responds to this goal: “the definition that tends to dominate public and academic discourse on the topic is one based on organizational practices and the provision of food, drink and accommodation. Such a definition, whilst useful, is limited as it fails to address the essence of hospitality and constrains its intellectual possibilities. This narrow focus reduces hospitality to an economic activity, just as it reduces the interactions between hosts and guests to commercial exchanges and the elements of hospitality (food, beverages and beds) to commodities” (Lynch, Molz, McIntosh, Lugosi, & Lashley, 2011, p. 5-6). Against this reductionism, the editorial board is considering hospitality as a cultural and social practice (Selwyn, 2000) that raises ethical and policy issues: “Hospitality is a phenomenon that, even in its failure, evokes the ancient and persistent question: how should we welcome the stranger, the sojourner, the traveller, the other? Where might hospitable encounters occur, and what kinds of spaces does hospitality produce? Who is able to perform the welcoming host, and who can be admitted as a guest?” (Molz & Gibson, 2007b, p. 1). In France, the word is not used to designate a commercial activity. Gotman gives the following definition: “Hospitality can be defined as what is enabling individuals and families from different places to socialize, to host, to be mutually and reciprocally useful to one another. This means that hospitality involves sociability practices, some aids and services that facilitate access to local resources, and commitment of links beyond the immediate interaction, only able to ensure reciprocity. Hospitality is also, and perhaps more particularly a device, a frame, a protocol which guarantees the arrival, the encounter, the stay and the departure of the guest.”¹ (Gotman, 2001, p. 3). This definition that we retain, corresponds to the hospitality within the CouchSurfing network that acts as a non-binding frame. May the reader keep in mind that what we are referring to is a free practice!

II. From antique hospitality to the current hospitality social networks

“An act of hospitality can only be as poetic”

Jacques Derrida²

What is hospitality today? Is it a bygone practice because we cannot conceive it in a world guided by the required profitability of all human activity? And if it subsists, is it only in remote areas,

where living social groups are regarded as historically insignificant because “progress” has not yet eliminated the love of the poetry of the hospitality gesture? Or is it taking place in the state's hospices, reuniting the indigents, the fools and other sick that we refuse to see? Reference to the past may better illuminate the current situation.

The death of antique hospitality

Whether virtue of the wise man in Aristotle's thought or every citizen's obligation in Plato's, hospitality is a “sacred duty” (Gotman, 1997, p. 5) that one makes as much out of obedience to civil law as to preserve oneself from the thunderbolts of Zeus.

Hospitality, whether a personal disposition or a duty imposed on all by law and religion, hospitality was a common practice in antiquity and was a genuine contract that committed individuals, families or cities of different places to provide each other accommodations and assistance. The travelling guest was inviolable and sacred. It was important to attract his good graces even and especially if he was a stranger, because in that case, no one knew his power and the dangers he could carry. Or if he was a messenger from God or even God himself, disguised as a stranger (Jabès, 1991)? From that time onward, hospitality was far from being reduced to only provide board and lodging. “The established interpersonal relationship implies a relation, a social bond, some values of solidarity and sociability” (Montandon, 2004, p. 7). They are organized into a reciprocal system that is fostering social cohesion and reducing the risk of conflict.

The English word “hospitality” comes from the French “hospitalité” and from the Latin “hospitalitas”, which comes from “hospitalis” (concerning the host, hospitable), which is itself derived from “hospes” (which can be translated into French as “host”, whether he is the one who gives hospitality or the one who receives hospitality, or the passing traveler). Every word of this family, as well as “hostis” (the stranger, the enemy) originates from the verb “hostire” that means equalize, put to the same level. This is to temporarily remove the asymmetry between the master of the premises, located inside and the passing alien, or potential enemy, who comes from outside. Eliminating this asymmetric position aims not only to protect him, but also to protect oneself from him.

In the first chapter of her book, “Le sens de l'hospitalité”, Gotman traces the French history of the concept. The word appears in French in 1206 and refers to “welcoming the indigent, the travelers in convents, hospices and hospitals.” (Gotman, 2001, p. 13). In the 16th century, the word means either the charity-based reception or the ancient hospitality based on reciprocity laws towards peers. With Diderot and d'Alembert, hospitality finds again a philosophical dimension inspired by the ancient Stoics, who asserted themselves as citizens of the universe: hospitality is described as the

expansion of ties with humanity. Gradually, as it passes from the religious domain to the state domain, and from the sacred to the law, by secularization, the trend of hospitality declines. With the development of hotels and the tourism industry, it became a trade from the 18th century onward. Meanwhile, private hospitality was replaced by the establishment of charitable institutions funded by the States: hospices and hospitals for the sick and the indigents. Even if we can consider that the transformation of the private hospitality in law represents a social advance, this development associated to the commodification of hosting signified the death of hospitality as essential form of socialization in that it replaced “the intersubjective relations involved in hospitality exercise” by neutral mechanisms in terms of social ties (Gotman, 2004, p. 99).

To Scherer, this near-disappearance of hospitality³ has given way to suspecting laws. Today, he said, hospitality is no more than “an episodic luxury”, an ornament of the selfishness a family is wearing “from time to time, during a brief invitation, a reception, a party with friends, familiars” (Schérer, 1993, p. 14). Yet he thinks that hospitality is still present diffusely in “the edges, in the margins or the interstices”, somewhere in the unconsciousness of our inhospitable contemporary societies (Schérer, 1993, p. 16). And from the confines, hospitality, appearing where it is not expected, undermines the society with its corrosive force. Scherrer is asking: “ultimately, is hospitality not a particular sensitivity to one's fellow man?”(Schérer, 1993, p. 21). We can even ask the question, is it not an ethics?

Hospitality as ethics

Derrida envisages hospitality as an ethics. In his seminars held in 1996 and 1997 on the theme of hospitality, he distinguished the *laws* of hospitality from the *Law* of hospitality. While the former takes place under a repayment rationale and corresponds to the rights and duties “always conditioned and conditional, as defined by the Greco-Latin tradition (or Judeo-Christian), by law and the philosophy of law until Kant and Hegel” (Derrida, 1997, p. 31), the latter is unlimited, absolute and subject to any condition⁴: it is addressed “to the absolute other, unknown, anonymous and that I give him place, that I let him come, that I let him arrive, and let him take place in the place I offer him, without asking for reciprocity (entry into a pact), or even his name” (Derrida, 1997, p. 29). It is a law “not mandatory, without order or duty. A law without law, in short. A call that summons without commanding” (Derrida, 1997, p. 77). These two expressions of hospitality implicate themselves and eliminate themselves mutually and simultaneously. The absolute Law erects an ideal horizon not only of hospitality, but more widely of ethics. It is above the law while being outside the law. It is illegal and transgressive. Yet the Law requires the laws in order not to be “abstract, utopian, illusory”, but potentially “effective, concrete, determined”, while the laws “deny it, threaten it in any case, sometimes corrupt it or pervert it [...] For this corruptibility is essential,

irreducible, necessary. Perfectibility of laws is at this price; thus their historicity. Conversely, the conditional laws would cease to be laws of hospitality if they were not guided, inspired, sucked, even required, by the law of unconditional hospitality” (Derrida, 1997, p. 75).

Does this missing or dead hospitality only exists in its absolute, utopic and dreamed form? As an interstitial forgotten virtue, emerging where least expected? Or is it only present in negative, reflecting through the aggressive inhospitality towards strangers in many countries? In the light of this, how interpret the emergence of the social networks of hospitality in the early 21th century? Is it a manifestation of this interstitial virtue that has never really disappeared or is it just an entertainment for the privileged?

Hospitality resurrected through Internet ?

A tourist guide on networks of hospitality has identified more than thirty worldwide (Hégron & Pagès, 2009). Based on this incomplete survey, it appears that 60% of them are centered on a peculiarity of its members (tango dancers, policemen, teachers, homosexuals, people over the age of 50, cyclists, etc.). The other networks are "generalists" and the vast majority of them are recent and free to access. The provisions for membership vary from simply creating a profile on the Internet within minutes to being interviewed about one's motivations. While these networks are open to all, and members can reside in any part of the world, the vast majority is composed of Westerners. The development of these networks owes much to the Internet that allows easy and quick connection between those who are looking for a place and those who are ready to welcome travelers. In most cases, there is no formal obligation to accept the person that hosted you, but a comparable gesture is nevertheless presumed⁵. This can be immediate or deferred but should not resemble any form of a refund. It is immediate during the interaction between host and guest, or time-deferred if the host visits his guest back, which happens very rarely. In fact, it is transferred to a third party according to the scheme proposed by Mauss, in which “the gift and the gift back do not travel between a and b, but between a, b and c: a gives to b who gives back to c. The donor (b) does not render to the donor (a) but to a third (c), by this way, donations are spreading indefinitely instead of returning to their starting point” (Gotman, 2001, p. 276). The gift of hospitality can be envisaged even more widely as a rendering corresponding to all the blessings from which we have benefited in our lives.

Conceived in 1997 following an experience of hospitality in an Egyptian family by the founder, the CouchSurfing website was launched in 2004 with the motto: “the world is smaller than you think”. Each member creates a profile on the website with greater or lesser details and states its willingness to welcome: “Yes”, “Maybe”, “Coffee or a drink”, “Traveling” or “No”. In 2006, the network had reached 90,000 members when a computer glitch removed all data from the system. In response to

the subsequent reaction of several thousand members, the founder decided to create a second version and to restructure the organization and the management of volunteers. The motto was changed to "Participate in Creating a Better World, One Couch at a Time". To that, an ideology was added: "We envision a world where everyone can explore and create meaningful connections with the people and places we encounter. Building meaningful connections across cultures enables us to respond to diversity with curiosity, appreciation and respect. The appreciation of diversity spreads tolerance and creates a global community". As of the 1st May 2011, the website contains over 2.7 million profiles corresponding to members residing in nearly 80,000 cities in 246 countries. The average number of accessions increased from 4,800 per week in 2007 to more than 14,000 in 2010. Members are primarily from Western countries: 51% from Europe, 26% from North America and 23% from the rest of the world. The United States has the largest number of CouchSurfers (21%), followed by Germany (9%), France (9%), Canada (4%) and the United Kingdom (4%). Members are rather young: the average age is 28 years, 70% of members are under 30 years, 21% are between 30 and 40 years and 9% are over 40 years. If one examines the hosting status of members, the part of those who accept to host ("Yes" and "Maybe") decreased between 2008 and 2011 from 60% to 45% in favor of "No" (+5), the "Coffee or a drink" (7) and "Traveling" (+4). However, in absolute terms, between those two dates, the number of people declaring themselves ready to accept hosting (Yes) increased from 188,175 to 838,707, representing a multiplication more than four fold.

The security of hospitality networks is based on the reputation of members (Molz, 2007c) through various signs, visible on the profiles online. Within the CouchSurfing network, three optional systems can establish the reputation of the members (which can be linked to the notion of honor at the base of traditional hospitality). These systems are as follows:

- Three steps for being verified: 1) email address checking (obligatory when creating a profile), 2) verification of banking details and therefore of the real identity of the member through a donation of at least 25 € and 3) postal address checking. Only 8% of members are "verified".
- Vouched members are spreading little by little, from the volunteers involved in the organization towards others members. A member who has been vouched for by three different people can then vouch for members he wants among his friends. Vouching for someone means "I met this person, he is a friend and I completely trust him in terms of values of the network." 6.5% of members are vouched.
- References are usually written after each experience of hospitality by the protagonists. Readable on profiles, they give an idea of how the experience has been lived on both sides. But there are very few negative references because people generally refrain instead of

reducing the chances of the member in his future requests. Thus the interpretation of the references requires a particular expertise: one must know how to read between the lines to guess the critics that might be hidden.

But these signs are considered as additional collateral and those without the positive signs are not necessarily excluded from the network. At the same time, their effectiveness is relative because even if a member has a negative reference, he could easily remove his profile in order to create a new one.

A priori, the practices of hospitality made through the CouchSurfing network seem closer to the practices of the antiquity that were realized according to a specific code than to the unconditional hospitality of Derrida. But the framework set by the CouchSurfing network is much less rigid than the rules that may have existed in antiquity or in traditional societies: it consists of a set of tips which the protagonists of the relationship of hospitality are free to interpret in their own way. This allows more diverse and less rigid practices even if they also assume a share of staging on both sides.

III. Why practice hospitality now?

In fact, our interrogation (into whether the practice of hospitality is motivated by selfish reasons or by an incredible openness to others) is somewhat formal since it is clear that there is no unequivocal answer but multiple attitudes with altruistic and self-centered dimensions entangled. We will rather use this question to approach what happens in the relationship of hospitality. What do you get in return for giving hospitality? Why open one's apartment or house without apparently expecting anything in return? Why host, feed and spend time with strangers when in return, there is more housework to do and bed sheets to wash?

One can form an initial idea by consulting the opinions expressed on the personal page of members. We studied fifty randomly selected profiles⁶. Most of the reviews are along the tone of "I like it" or "What a great idea!" and rely on the use of laudatory adjectives: "awesome", "amazing", "great", "incredible", "brilliant", "excellent", "wonderful", etc. All praise the existence of the network because of the opportunities it offers. The three most cited contributions are: 1) the opportunity to meet "new" people, described as: "interesting", "nice and friendly", "sweet", "good", "cool"; 2) the occasion of experiencing authenticity ("to get the true local experiences", "to see how the locals really live"), and 3) to acquire knowledge through contact with other cultures. Only one person mentioned the opportunity to travel by spending less. Another point often emphasized in these reviews is to be connected to people all around the world and thus constitute a global community. And these social relations take place without money as an intermediary: "so let's try to cut money out of the picture, instead let's make exchanges from the heart" suggests an Australian member.

Also outlined are the positive consequences that result from these exchanges either in terms of an enhanced sociability and of an enhanced self-confidence in interacting with others: “it makes people less scared of each other. [...] it makes the world a little less anonymous” testifies a Norwegian member. This practice would make the world a better and more pleasant place to live.

This brief summary gives an overview of the main reasons for using the hospitality network. Moving forward requires one to take into account the asymmetry of positions of the protagonists involved in the relationship of hospitality. Why does Peter receive a request for accommodation from someone who plans to travel hundreds of miles? Is it really in order to share Peter’s intimacy that this person sent him a request? Or, is it not rather because this person needs to take an examination not far from his apartment, or because Peter’s place of residence is an ideal stopover on a vacation itinerary? Was Peter chosen for his nice appearance, for the pleased faces of his last guests, or for his many positive references? Or, is not it rather because he is providing a large separate bedroom? Or, is it because all the other people contacted have refused accommodation? As these questions suggest, there is no reason to feel flattered to have been chosen, so the multiple motivations of members looking for accommodation can be far from that of the host’s. The motivations of the host are different; we agree with Gotman that it is mainly to establish a relationship with the guest without which hospitality would remain a commercial or instrumental relation (Gotman 2001 : 267-269). The householder receives more for his pleasure than by obligation while the host is first in need of accommodation. The ambiguity of the hospitality relationship is there. Taking into account this asymmetry, we will examine the different motivations of members, by distinguishing among those related to traveling, those concerning the person seeking accommodations, and those related to the relationship between the host and the guest, concerning both as protagonists.

The reasons related to the way of traveling

Three main reasons have emerged from our interviews: to find a cheap accommodation in order to travel longer and farther, to travel without being a tourist and enrich oneself by meeting the locals.

It is hard to deny the fact that many of those who travel using CouchSurfing are motivated by the possibility to enjoy a free accommodation. Two attitudes stand out from this finding. Some consider that this behavior is contrary to the philosophy of the CouchSurfing network. This attitude is actually denounced in the website and in the forums. Some refuse to welcome those who use the network for these reasons. Jean does not harbor those who come only for one night: “If people tell you [...] I want a couch for one night, I let it go because for me it is really people who see me as an hotel ... They arrive at 9 o'clock pm, the next morning, they leave at ten o'clock, you don't see them,

it's still constraints, I make a bed and wash the sheets every time". Others readily accept this fact because they are benefiting from it. Claire loves to receive visitors even for one night: "to host people for one night does not bother me if we spend a nice evening, if we discuss many things together". Finally, the positions of Claire and Jean are not contradictory: unlike Claire, Jean believes he has not the expected return in terms of sociability when they are staying just one night. But in both cases, there is an expectation of a counterpart.

In addition, according to its members, CouchSurfing allows one to live an authentic local experience by revealing the lifestyles of inhabitants: "CouchSurfing gives you a unique opportunity to discover the face of everyday life, performed regularly by all those local people with local ideas, local activities and local customs they live by", said a 29-year old American woman on her profile. So-called "CouchSurfers" give as pretext their backstage entrance to proudly assert that they are not tourists: "It's a less touristic way to explore the world", writes a young Swiss member on her personal page. Alain, one interviewee tells us: "when you are with someone local, you don't feel like a tourist actually, it's like going on the other side of the barrier between tourists and local people". Being a tourist is negatively perceived by surveyed CouchSurfers. "To me, being a tourist equals being fooled", states Mylène, who expects her host to give her tips: "having the good plans, the good plans from someone living in the town and who knows and who can tell you to go there and not go there".

Without CouchSurfing, it is difficult to meet the locals: "at best you'll meet someone in a shop and I can not see myself call someone on the street and say, well, I('ll) just eat at your house tonight", remarks Violaine. That is precisely what motivates Claire in her appeal to the network: ""The evening alone are horrible because I do not want to go to a cafe and to talk to people because it is not that easy, and therefore I think the reason why I chose to travel with this type of accommodation is that, here, my evenings are animated. that evenings are nice too and that I can share... In Rome I was in a hostel and we talk very little in a hostel."

For Salome and Diane, couchsurfers from Quebec, the importance of this form of travel is also related to the fact of being immersed in local culture: "It is a clash of cultures, that are different everywhere and in everything, in all what you eat, in the way to be welcomed, in the way of verbalizing ... You ('re) gonna walk with the person, you can see that it's really different, the way of life, the way of moving, the accents. It's funny to say but the accents reflect really the personality of the place you are." According to Salome, the interest goes well beyond this immersion: "with CouchSurfing, you cling to a place because you had emotional ties with someone. There are places we stayed just one night but as we get on so well with our host, we have super nice memories of the city, even if the city was not necessarily the most attractive one because we had so fun being there

with our host. There are other places where we didn't get on so well with our guest, even if the city was nice, we have less good memories.”

The reasons related to the encounter

According to the investigation conducted by Bialski, the first motive of traveling among CouchSurfers is self-development. On one hand, 78 per cent of people she interviewed consider that self-development is very or utterly important. On the other hand, the motivation for 56 per cent of the interviewees is “the self-development – learning about yourself and about the world that surrounds you” – whereas, for instance, only 14 per cent answered “Seeing interesting sights of the world”. Along with the founders of the network, she believes that the best way to achieve this aim is to multiply the intense emotional experiences through CouchSurfing. To progress in life, we presently wish to become close and intimate with many different people, which is made easier by the extension of our relational potential area to the entire planet, multiplying the opportunities for contact and allowing us to choose our relationships according to our needs. Today, the contacts would be more fluid, more ephemeral and more numerous. In talking about her own experience, she describes a new form of relationship: “one which was quick, deeply intense and moving, with an undertone of selfdiscovery. It was a pure exchange, as well. Whether planned or not, both my traveler and I learned and discovered something during our week-long interaction.” (Bialski, 2007, p. 9).

It is true that the relation of hospitality in CouchSurfing is characterized by the rapid sharing of an intimate space, sometimes in a state of certain promiscuity. Moreover, it is short and is not intended to continue over time, which may explain its possible emotional intensity. In addition the physical and mental mobility of CouchSurfers may facilitate the appearance of intimacy. Is intimacy so immediate and systematic? If trust and sincerity can be natural and fast, is this the case for intimacy? Lefebvre-Decaudin⁷ expresses doubts: “Contrary to appearances, hospitality relationships do not imply the sharing of intimacy in the deepest sense of the word. Building a truly deep relationship needs time. Here it is a question of offering his couch and to provoke a short exchange, an intellectual meeting, pleasant or insignificant, but framed” (Labaronne, 2008, p. 132).

And among the members that we interviewed, the exchanges haven't been sustained with the guests. Even though Anne has hosted more than forty CouchSurfers, she has no longer has contact with any of them. Jean has continued one relationship with one of his guests, a windsurfer like himself. Patricia admits being very bad at long distance relationships: “It's not easy to find things to say, we don't have so much to say to each other”. Valentin explains the lack of continuous contact due to distance: “no big friendships, because they are far, things changed”.

If all of the people we interviewed recognize enrichment due to the practice of hospitality, they reject the term transformation, aside from Valentin, who admits: “I think it changed me, it helps me to work my positive attitude”. Mylène, who has always lived with a roommate, said that: “this is not the change of my life to have someone home”, but she considers that her richer life is due not to the short and intense relationships arising from the practice of hospitality, but to the close relations maintained with local members of the network who hold the same values.

The members we interviewed agree that there are positive values shared by network members such as trust, openness⁸, sharing, a taste for travel (Anne: “You trust people and they trust you. And you don't worry”, or Jean : “you feel the confidence in the relation and I think it's rare these days”), but also the adaptability to the places and conditions (Jean: “simplicity in lifestyle, they adapt easily”, Mylène: “For me, that's the definition of CouchSurfing: be open, be respectful, while respecting intimacy, have the intelligence to see what to do or not do, do not go too far”). One could thus describe those members of the network as "global cosmopolitans" in the words of Urry (Urry, 2000). However, they all deny the idea to trust more easily the network members than other people. For them, trust depends on the relationship with someone, not on her belonging to a network.

We therefore find that motivations, in addition to being asymmetric, are varied: Anne, who just receives for the moment, likes to host in order “to entertain” and fill her evenings, while Jean finds “genial the possibility to communicate with people from the whole world ... and to build links in order to visit these people or welcome them”, and Claire and Valentin both found in CouchSurfing the occasion to have company in the destinations when they are traveling. Mylène joined CouchSurfing mainly to meet people in the city where she had just moved and to be enriched by their frequentation. These reasons are only varied in appearance because they all proceed more or less from the same logic: the seeking of experiences can be about the new, the unexpected, the emotion, the adventure, the entertainment or being part of a community; it is always a way to fight against a certain lack (quantitative or qualitative) in social relationships, and to feel alive through these social relations. Moreover, sharing intimacy or the appearance of an emotional connection is far from systematic or even desired all the time and with everyone. It is rather the result of a combination of factors that one might be unable to control. It is the same with all that may result from these positive relationships in terms of personal growth and openness.

IV. Hospitality and reciprocity

Finally, can we see CouchSurfing as an expression of an altruistic attitude of openness to others, in opposition to the individualist consumer society, or does it rather mean adding to the existing range of supply, a new possibility, one cool and modern one, and more importantly, a gratis one? It is true

that many members are experimenting with new ways of living (there is even a group called “quit your job and travel” on CS) and are part of the bio-ecological-vegan alternative nebula, but a community of nearly 3 million members in over 200 countries is necessarily made of a wide variety of people, regardless of the values it promotes. Those Bialski met and described are frequent travellers, seeking to escape the gravity of time and place, gaining satisfaction through these intense emotional experiences, while themselves being detached from time and space, merely looking for personal development through “instant profit friends” (Bialski, 2009, p. 23). They transpose the consumer optimization behaviour to the sphere of social relations: in other words, they aim to increase their sphere of selective encounters (their quantity, interest and potential intensity) by minimizing the time spent in their personal identification, in preliminary social convention and encounters. Thus, in some way, they are using CouchSurfing to satisfy their addiction to immediacy, to instantaneity, to intimacy, to the extraordinary and to a “cosmopolitan desires of consuming difference” (Molz, 2007c, p. 70). For the ethologist Cyrulnik, this behavior is peculiar to our age. It is important that the exchange doesn't take too long because then, “we could risk to establish a real relationship! We help each other from afar, but we're afraid of everything that anchors and commits [...] We must be able to separate without too much pain or hurting. So we invented a new intimacy, detached, closer to the barter than to the lasting commitment. Would this little phenomenon of passing traveler be the witness of this culture without attachment that develops today?” (Labaronne, 2008, p. 130). It is also possible to compare this attitude to what Bauman calls “grazing behaviour” and which characterizes all tourists: “what they were seeking were, in the first place, experiences – unlike the experiences they lived through before, unlike everything else they knew; untried tastes, un-experienced sensations. But sensations are un-experienced and tastes are untried only once. Tourists have by definition ‘pure relationship’ to the place they visit – ‘pure’ meaning that it has no other purpose than the consumption of pleasurable sensation and that once the satisfaction wanes, it wilts and fades as well – and so you move to another relationship, hopefully as ‘pure’ as the last one. The world of pure relationships is a huge collection of grazing grounds, and living in such a world is shaped after the pattern of wandering from one succulent and fragrant meadow to another” (Franklin, 2003, p. 208).

The practices we described seem a thousand miles far from Derrida's unconditional hospitality. This is perhaps inevitable just because hospitality practices are governed by a frame even flexible, and most of the time, the relationship happens only under the conditions chosen by the host and the guest. Each member will accept the other according to his own selection criteria (availability, age, photos, supposed affinities, geographical location, comfort, etc.).

Is there still a place for a subversive hospitality in such a tableau? An hospitality, which would threaten the obligation of profitability typical to the “rational” functioning of mankind because of her gratuity; an hospitality which would disrupt, from the margins, the order of the world? Or, an hospitality seen as a disruptive or disturbed practice, or an hospitality that would express preference for encounters and human relationships over any economic value, hospitality based on time-sharing, allowing the visitor to discover a place through the consciousness that host and guest are always first and foremost, both guests of the place? An hospitality that is neither an accumulation of memories and of “friends”, nor a race for having more, an hospitality that gradually transforms the ones who are devoted to it, committing to the Law of unconditional hospitality, as defined by Derrida?

The answer is probably positive, although it is impossible to fully grasp what is at stake during the relationship of hospitality, which is different every time and will always possess an element of the unknown and mystery. Is it not in this mysterious part that unconditional hospitality is niched, as an unattainable promise ? If it is out of range, maybe can we touch it through some rare moments of grace during the reception of the guest⁹. If these moments (subversive by their simplicity) must arise under a special chemistry in the exchange, linked to the time, place, and protagonists of the relationship, the frame formed by the network wouldn't prevent it, nor the selection criteria that would have led the host and guest to be in the presence of each other. The surprises, both good and bad are always possible because the profiles can be so much misleading. This requires to distinguish between the moment before the reception and the moment of the reception.

The real threat to these moments would rather come from a desire to control their apparition, or from being on hold vis-à-vis the other, and thereby increasing the difficulty to let one go to the unknown part of every relationship of hospitality. Sometimes protagonists are frustrated because of misunderstandings¹⁰, but even so, the encounter was there, present as a potential non seized. It can even be realized later, mentally, due to the “spiritual” evolution made by both protagonists of the relationship.

It is worth recalling that the rules are necessary not only because they allow the host and the guest to meet, but also because they make possible the test provoked by the person who transgresses those rules by leaving the role he is expected to play; for it is a game that host and guest are playing together through the relationship of hospitality. The host has the advantage of setting the scene as he or she sees fit. From this game unfolds a permanent recomposition of identities, each having the opportunity to “be himself or adapt to the other (or what one believe he is)” (Gotman, 2001, p. 235). This confrontation highlights differences, questions the other and about oneself, about the legitimacy of “being what I am”. And in this case, it tests and transforms the host and the guest

through an exchange process in which everyone assumes the share of strangeness of the other. Hospitality is a motionless trip that promotes the “psychic, relational, cultural and social mobility” (Gotman, 2001, p. 285) and increases even more the relational capacity that one accepts to allow oneself to enter a relationship, to forget the rules, to forget oneself, even if it is for better to find oneself after the experience is over.

According to Molz, the fact that hospitality networks are “based precisely on an economy of reciprocal exchange, both in the moment of the hospitality encounter and across the community as a whole” contradicts Derrida’s definition of unconditional hospitality (Molz, 2007c, p. 75). Yet, isn’t it a way to consider reciprocity by conciliating it with the unconditional hospitality? First, in hospitality networks, reciprocity rules are much less stringent than in traditional systems decryped by Mauss and in antique hospitality. The sociologist Godbout had reread the schema of Mauss from the example of hospitality: “It is true that at a first level, he that welcomes, hosts, is the giver. And he that is hosted is the one who receives. But what gives or returns the one that is received? Certainly, he brings gifts, some wine ... Objects. But, first and foremost, he gives his presence, he offers himself. He is a gift. This social relationship we called “hospitality” is still inhabited by the strange gift of the person itself that is received. [...] A successful act of hospitality is one where the recipient feels having received something, where the recipient receives! The giver receives and the recipient gives. Who gives and who gets here? Is this the ideal type of reciprocity? Hospitality is the type of donation where the answer to this question is impossible.” (Godbout, 1997, pp. 41-42).

Reciprocity seen as an exchange, as a mutual and simultaneous gift of oneself, as time spent together is a reciprocity in which the rendering is not seen as the repayment of what has been given. It is a reciprocity in which ultimately “it’s not a matter of giving for pushing the other to repay, but above all, of giving for pushing the other to give also” (Chanial, 2010, 530). And in this case, are we really far from the unconditional hospitality of Derrida? For whom Levinas book “Totality and Infinity” is “a great treaty of hospitality that allows one to understand how the concept of hospitality can go from receiving someone to receiving from someone.”(Manzi, 2004).

V. Hospitality as a gesture?

“As if the place in question in hospitality was originally belonging neither to the host nor to the guest, but to the gesture by which one welcomes the other...”

(Dufourmantelle, 1997, p. 60)

We found that the hospitality practiced throughout the CouchSurfing network, particularly in the small French town of Perpignan, was resulting from a variety of motivations whose common denominator is to seek to meet the existential need of social relations, whether the perceived lack is

qualitative (a search for emotional experiences, shared intimacy, adventure, etc.) or quantitative (to break out of solitude, to be part of a network, etc.). For Bauman, this need he describes as “the need to top up the proximity of otherness with recognition of shared humanity and enrichment of its contents”, is a genuine need and tourism is a substitute satisfaction because it fails to really fulfill this need (Bauman, 2001, p. 214). Are not experiences of hospitality such substitutes, too? The desire to meet this need through the practices of hospitality can lead to an altruistic attitude, an egocentric one or a mixture of both. There is within the practice of hospitality a constant oscillation between a relational consumerism rationale and a sense of giving, without expectation of return. Is this oscillation not observable, in the West at least, as in the conciliation of contemporary individualism and of a certain openness to other¹¹ ? In this sense, we can also say that the practice of hospitality that we have analyzed, although varied, are current in their forms. The move towards greater simplicity and less formality in relations also adds to this currentness¹².

Although unconditional hospitality from Derrida¹³ seems an out of reach ideal, practicing hospitality remains subversive because it enters in opposition to the socio-economic functioning of our world (that somehow is symbolized by the following judgement: “There are no free lunches. One does not open the door to strangers without costs.” Aramberri, 2001, p. 750). It is subversive from an economic standpoint because it does not involve any monetary exchange¹⁴. It is more subversive from a social point of view because it means, in a world ever increasingly obsessed with security, to welcome strangers home and to take the risk of an encounter with the unknown.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Norié Fukuda for all the improvements she brought to the English version.

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Appendix 1 : Interview methodology

A sample of fifteen people was formed from a couchrequest simulation on the website after having removed all those who were traveling or unwilling to accommodate. In such a research, the site provides a list of profiles classified according a non-transparent procedure based on various criteria (response rate, number of friends and number, date of last connection, etc.). To create this sample, we selected profiles at different locations of the list by encouraging a diversity of age, status (single, couple or several), hosting status (possibly be, yes, definitely). Five interviews took place in 2009 and five more in 2010.

The objective of this survey was to provide a source of complementary information related to our research hypotheses. Based on existing work of Gotman on hospitality and Bialski on CouchSurfing, we built an interview plan with a strong structure even if we didn't use it during the interviews that took place according to their own logic. However, the plan evolved after the first interviews (in reverse order and with new themes), as well as the way to conduct the interviews over time with less intervention on my part. I have not hidden my participation in the network (some know me well) and I have not specifically chosen a neutral position, preferring to remain natural. These interviews were conducted in the homes of interviewed. We were in the living room around the dining table.

¹ All French quotations were translated into English by the author.

² Derrida in (Dufourmantelle, 1997, p. 10)

³ Without denying that it tends to disappear, it is still possible to meet, around the world, ritualized forms of hospitality related to the code of honor. Centlivres describes the case of the Pashtun tribal code (Centlivres, 1997). And even the current practices of "CouchSurfing" may be partly based on traditional rituals of hospitality related to an honor code as shown in the farewell scene played by the Moroccan family for the neighborhood when the CouchSurfers are leaving (Buchberger, 2011).

⁴ As in Emerson, where absolute hospitality is sincere, and is a specific virtue of heroes, it must be given by love and not by charity or ostentation (Bessone, 2004, p. 1576).

⁵ For each of its members, an hospitality network presents in parallel the number of times he hosted someone and the number of times he had been hosted in order to encourage balance. This type of approach individualizes the behavior. This is at the expense of the values of solidarity linking the members together. During a life, sometimes it is possible to accommodate and other times not; i.e., some may be travelling and some not, etc.

⁶ Each page of the website presents randomly twelve profiles. We noted the opinions of the first fifty members present on this page that had filled the section "Opinions on the CouchSurfing.org Project" (February 2011). We can hypothesize that they completed this section when joining the network or during the first weeks after accession.

⁷ Co-author of the book *l'Intimité* published in 2004 by Jean-Claude Lattès, here, an extract from an interview in a magazine article about hospitality networks.

⁸ "Few words are as far frequently associated with the hospitality as openness. Opening oneself to others, openness to other, openness to the outside, the word itself summarizes the quality of hospitality" (Gotman, 2001, p. 278)

⁹ Not to mention moments of grace, Bialski describes his hosting experiences as “heightened life, sometimes odd, extremely heartfelt and emotional.” (Bialski, 2007, p. 9). They are exalting and could correspond to the way Graburn described, in 1977, the tourism experience as an experience of passage in a temporary sacred world beyond time and space (Graburn, 1989).

¹⁰ From our field and the sources used, we are speaking of relations of hospitality that take place mainly between Westerners. In other cases, cultural differences can make the encounter more difficult. Buchberger reports a situation of complete misunderstanding between a Moroccan family and one of his German guest who finally accuses the family of the young Moroccan who welcomes her to want to convert her to Islam simply because the grandmother of the latter asked her to say "bismillah" before eating. The relationship ends in failure, which shows that improved understanding of the other is not an obvious result from the hospitality relationship.

¹¹ This reconciliation may also be that of the "external" quest for authenticity (MacCannell, 1973) and the existential quest for authenticity (Wang, 1999).

¹² This simplification was advocated by Transcendentalists philosophers like Emerson or Thoreau: “One can be a guest without having been invited, as in passing, like in a natural relationship that owes nothing to the artificiality of formal relations between men. We can be the hosts of our neighbors, of one's fellow man, like we are the guests of nature” (Bessone, 2004, p. 1586)

¹³ It would require a movement toward a free practice of hospitality. Not free because of the absence of commercial exchange. Free because this hospitality serves no particular purpose except to simply accept the guest that arrives, to accept him or her without any specific expectations, without questioning the reasons that led him or her to call upon you, in order to experience alterity by welcoming “the host that appears and traumatizes”. (Derrida in Dufourmantelle, 1997, p. 76).

¹⁴ Note that some abuses have been identified where the demand is very important like in some very touristic European capitals, and where the difference in living standards between host and guest is important like in some countries in the South or the East.