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Philoxenia — the DNA of hospitality: hype or cure?

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ABSTRACT: Philoxenia is the ancient Greek custom or tradition of treating a stranger as a friend, but it goes much deeper in terms of its reality and consequences. This custom sits deep in Greek culture and mythology, where its layers of culture and religion formed a powerful force for creating peaceful relations at individual, group or societal levels. A modern-day example of survival of the ancient and unconditional form of philoxenia is the island of Icaria, situated in the Aegean Sea. The Icarian culture and its way of life has remained faithful to traditional customs, aided by an isolated geographical location. Icaria is an isolated island unprotected from the wind. It is, however, also a "Blue Zone" where the average life expectancy is one of the highest in the world and where heart disease and cancers are extremely rare. This research note defines and discusses the ancient tradition of philoxenia (otherwise known as hospitality), highlighting its unconditionality as a force for harmony, social cohesion and inspired outcomes, contrasted with the conditionality of the modern forms of hospitality that are based on the exchange of money for services. It discusses how understanding philoxenia can illuminate dysfunctionality in modern hospitality service-scapes, and considers a wider geopolitical perspective that conflicts can be reduced at national level (according to some scholars), just as ignoring philoxenia and instead allowing xenophobia to go unchecked can encourage conflicts. Research is drawn from ancient and modern sources, and the proposition developed is that philoxenia is a moral imperative, an unconditional commitment to the stranger, at peril of dissolution due to materialism and dysfunctionality in our modern setting, which in turn is giving rise to avoidable levels of conflict between individuals, groups or nations.

KEYWORDS: geopolitics, honour, inspiration, longevity, social cohesion, unconditionality

Background

As background to the formulation of this research area, below follows a personal reflection on my own individual research focus as it developed over the years, echoing the dilemmas I came across, firstly as marketing manager for a multinational communications company, secondly as a hotel general manager and thirdly as a researcher/lecturer in university education in the Netherlands.

Marketing manager

Firstly, in terms of marketing I was interested in what could win, what could increase market share, and what could increase profit. How you can run a successful business was the dominant question for me, so I was commercially minded and focused on how marketing could solve business problems through strategy, product development, awareness and communications. From there I started to ask questions about what might drive markets, seeing them over time as a never-ending evolution of customer needs or desires based on a set of macro drivers, most notably the information revolution, geopolitical influences (including government regulations or assistance) and cultural elements. At the start of the growth of computers and networks back in

the 1980s, with email, etc., I witnessed Marshal McLuhan's (1994) vision of the global village develop from prediction to reality in a decade. My understanding then was that marketing was the key to growth in markets, but what I learned was that a strategy is only as good as its implementation. Decision-makers do not just hold power over human resource questions, but influence company culture and processes by which change is managed, all of which can effectively derail or enable strategy and implementation.

Hotel manager

Later, while working in a hotel in the Middle East, I became a manager of change. There is always resistance to change, so the implementation is usually problematic but crucial. It also cannot be unremittingly confrontational. At some point, change, like the stranger, must be accepted (Nouwen, 1975). A strategy can be logical, correct, even inspired, for example, a combination of improved computer-driven technology and thorough market analysis, but success will be won in the daily battlefield of customer interactions, processes, food quality, facilities, standards and cleanliness. This means the team delivering the change must be fully on board. Change is only possible when it is accompanied by success (often measured by increased revenue and better customer feedback), but that very success must be

achieved through change. Dealing with different cultures and evolving company culture is and was a major ingredient to be considered too. Its connection to philoxenia (the ancient origin of what we now call hospitality) is complex. Above all, happy guests are central and happy guests mean happy workers (Heskett et al., 2008). For happy workers, read happy citizens. This last sentence hints at the wider applicability of the notion and practice of philoxenia.

As a hotel manager, I experienced geopolitical storms that can lay waste to business livelihoods. In a matter of seconds, news circulates the globe, and enormous damage can be done to tourism or hospitality interests. A full season of hotel group reservations can be lost in a matter of days because of a national or regional conflict. Tourism and hospitality depend on security (physical, emotional, informational, legal) for their very existence. Whatever the shock or disruption though, the resilience to recover will still involve the same variables mentioned, with customers being central, making philoxenia (how deep the concept of hospitality runs in the company or national culture) always important and relevant. The geopolitical struggle between autocratic regimes and democratic countries in our world now has, if anything, intensified and changed in nature over the last decades, making a deep and broad definition and practice of philoxenia both relevant and important.

Teacher/researcher

More recently I have experienced dilemmas related to what is considered "normal" in countries or organisations, and what role norms and values play in environments where the element of personal interaction is really everything and the battle is either won or lost in a millisecond or a "moment of truth" (Carlzon, 1987). If a stranger becomes a friend in that millisecond, and there is trust in the air, which outcomes can this inspire? If this is a meeting of hearts or minds instead of a transactional or mechanically driven formula, what worlds open up, how much can be forgiven and what can be achieved? The answer is, I believe, that the possibilities become endless.

What is philoxenia?

Ancient Greece itself was split into city states, with Corinthians, Spartans and Athenians all in competition and sometimes conflict with one another. Philoxenia became the glue enabling social cohesion that rescued them and was one of the reasons for the growth and success of the Greek Empire (Brown, 2022).

In a recent blog article, Erik Brown explains in detail what the component parts of philoxenia represented back then and their relevance today. He argues that if anything can quiet acidic relations, it is hospitality — but not just any hospitality, the Greek form of philoxenia with its layers of *philótimo* and *geneodoria*. *Philótimo* is a deep association with honour. It is a duty to go above and beyond for another. *Geneodoria* means to be brave at giving presents. Brown goes on to argue that this expanded definition of hospitality, enshrined as philoxenia in Greek mythology and culture and in evidence to this day, was the basis of the unity of the ancient Greeks and the bedrock upon which modern-day Greek tourism was built. According to Brown (2022), if tourism is the major driving force of the Greek economy, then philoxenia is its fuel.

Icaria still home to philoxenia

Thea Parikos, a resident of Icaria and owner of a guesthouse there, writes blogs about life on her island and relates that,

in ancient Greece, it was considered a sin to treat a stranger badly, as hospitality was always offered as standard, regardless of status, class or wealth (Parikos, 2023). Strangers knew that they would be welcomed into any home and would be treated like royalty. They would be provided with a bath, clean clothes, a wonderful meal, and attention would be paid to them. Back then, strangers were not tourists, instead they might have been messengers, exiles, or just people passing through on their way to another destination. In Greek, the word for hotel is, *xenodoxeio*, which stems from the *ancient* Greek meaning, "the acceptance of strangers". The root *xeno* is important, it is not just another word but rather denotes a code of moral values dating back to ancient times. *Xeno* then, is a way of life that Greeks have nurtured and practised for centuries, and which played an important role in their history and development. The word "philoxenia" means literally "friend to a stranger", often translated in English, somewhat inadequately perhaps, as far as Thea is concerned, as "hospitality".

In ancient Greek mythology, Zeus (Xenios) was a protector of travellers and *xenio* was literally the sacred duty to extend philoxenia. When this duty was either honoured or ignored, there were far-reaching consequences. For example, in Greek mythology, even the fall of Troy was linked to ignoring the imperatives of philoxenia (Homer, 1974). Abuse of the honourable offering of philoxenia brings catastrophic consequences in Greek mythology.

Philoxenia, simply put, is showing the way to a stranger, and accompanying them, instead of merely explaining where to go. Above all, it is about showing care, courtesy and literally acting as a friend would do. In Icaria (Thea's home), this code of values sits deep in the culture of the islanders, forming part of a way of life that has been preserved over the years. No one is a stranger, be they visitor or indeed a fellow islander. However, this aspect of the Icarian life exists as part of a unique culture and perhaps contributes to Icarians living longer lives, experiencing almost no mental or physical illness (Ekstedt, 2021). This mix of elements was explored in a series of TV programmes presented by the well-known Swedish chef, Niklas Ekstedt. His focus was on the links between lifestyle, culture and food, which combine to encourage longer lifespans in Icaria and the so-called Blue Zones of the world. In the case of Icaria, the culture of the island, with philoxenia as one of the cultural and societal pillars, is a significant element in this mix.

The elements identified as playing a role in the elongation of life expectancy, according to Ekstedt, are as follows. Firstly, social cohesion (inequality of incomes and social class do not exist on the island, or are limited at the very least), the close links and traditional cultural pillars (one of which is philoxenia) ensure that no one is left isolated, and inclusion is the norm. Secondly, the islanders live close to nature (growing, farming and producing their own food and wine), eating a diet rich in olive oil and organic vegetables, all traditionally prepared. Thirdly, the residents remain active and work until old age. Fourthly, a relaxed relationship to clock time, i.e. keeping time, is not a dominant cultural value. Thea confirms this as she acknowledges that clock time on Icaria is definitely not the boss. Watches, for example are not commonly worn, and appointments are not sharp but approximate, although the necessary work of daily life still gets done. For Icaria, philoxenia is a key element of social cohesion, and is enabled by the preservation of a traditional lifestyle on the island.

Where though does this leave the relevance of philoxenia in the modern-day hospitality service-scape? What is the relevance in a wider perspective? The remainder of this article builds a case for this and the wider relevance far beyond Icarian shores. The following paragraph explores in more depth the effects that culture and the growth of materialism have in terms of hospitable interactions related to philoxenia. It further develops ideas about the unconditionality of philoxenia as it is described in Greek mythology.

In our modern world, Hofstede (1980) talks of cultural dimensions which guide our relationships and the ways in which people behave in societal groups. Different cultures deal with the issue of time, for example, in vastly different ways. While timekeeping might be a dominant value in one society, it may have little value in another. In terms of Greek culture, and even more so on the Greek islands, clock time is by no means the master. These dimensions and their relative priorities quite obviously have an impact on hospitable interactions, especially if the definition of hospitality is qualified, limited or dependent. If the value of time is felt to be more important than the value of philoxenia, then an essential part of philoxenia, its unconditionality, is lost. The tradition of philoxenia is not related to circumstances; it is a moral imperative and therefore unconditional. Philoxenia is not something to be offered only as long as we have time (Ekstedt, 2021).

However, the more we understand the role of philoxenia as an unconditional and sacred tradition, the more we can see the pivotal role it plays in human interactions, and the more we understand the serious consequences from honouring or ignoring it. For insight into this sacred tradition, we do not need to look that far as Greek mythology (the *Iliad*), the Torah, Christian theology (the Holy Bible) and the Quran all contribute through parable and/or religious law to our understanding and realisation of how central and powerful the value of philoxenia really was and, one can argue, remains.

The story of the Trojan War recounted in Homer's *Iliad* traces the fatal series of events that eventually leads to the downfall of Troy and the death of Hector as he fought to save Troy from the Greeks. Paris, Prince of Troy had violated *xenia* (the honourable bond of hospitality) as he abducted the wife of King Menalaeus of Sparta while he was a guest of the king. This began a chain of events resulting in the fall of Troy and his own death. The *xenia* is not simply a one-way process then, friendship bestows gifts on both parties but involves truth, honour and trust. Once these are broken, dark forces are released and dire consequences follow.

The Torah talks about *mitsvas*. A *mitsva* is regarded as a sacred duty or commandment which must be followed. There are *mitsvas* for all areas of human life, but the message contained in Leviticus 19:34 as it applies to strangers is clear: "the stranger that dwells with you shall be to you as the home-born among you, and you shall love him as yourself". Exodus 23:9 is equally unequivocal: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him". And: "Do not disparage an Edomite for they are your brothers, and do not disparage an Egyptian for they provided a haven for you in their land" (Deuteronomy 23:8).

The Quran designates and defines hospitality as one of the noble ethics and high values of Islam. One of the fruits of faith, it is one of the practices of the prophets, and other righteous people. Islam has been keen on it and strongly urges its followers to adopt and practise it (Rabanah & Rabanah, 2016) and its practice is asserted as a basis for social solidarity.

So, the ancient concept and reality of philoxenia is, we can argue, extremely relevant today as it informs and relates to debates concerning "strangers" in various settings. Normally, in considering the paths towards effective hospitality, we might apply it to individuals or perhaps small group interactions, leading to feelings of welcome at one end of the spectrum, or alienation at the other. However, the broader picture does concern our attitudes in general to strangers, sometimes otherwise known as guests or even refugees. This, of course, is not a new phenomenon or debate. It is a subject of dispute and violent disagreement in our current national politics and geopolitics and has been so for hundreds of years as many modern countries are composed of populations which are melting pots of mixed immigrant waves.

The message of this research is the exploration of philoxenia in its original form (dating back to ancient Greek mythology) and in places like Icaria today, as a powerful imperative towards the stranger (almost in Biblical terms a commandment as it is unconditional), and as a pillar of society. This can be its significant value to the modern world. Furthermore, it functions as a force for harmony, inclusion and cohesion, something the development of materialism, for example, in modern-day hospitality ("I'll be hospitable to you as long as you pay me and follow my rules") has distorted or lost over time. However, it cannot be viewed in isolation. It does not exist in a vacuum, but requires a mixture of other elements to thrive. This links somewhat with Hofstede's (1980) dimensions that link societal attitudes to things like hierarchy, equality, power distance, attitudes to time, etc. In this sense, the concept and relevance of philoxenia (the polar opposite of xenophobia) can be seen in a wider context than simply hospitality-based organisations, but also in terms of individual, group, nation state or international discourse and relationships. This very wide applicability of philoxenia and its relevance to human discourse, interactions and relationships is part of religious texts too.

Jesus, in his parable relating to the Good Samaritan (Samaritans were a particular Judaic sect), demands again from us protection of the stranger as the highest priority, even at risk of danger to oneself. The stranger in this case has been stripped and beaten by bandits on route from Jericho to Jerusalem. Two priests then pass by on the other side of the road without helping him, until a Samaritan stops, helps the man and carries him to safety.

Turning to a more modern genre, Denzel Washington (the actor) portrays a modern-day character in a series of action films, *The Equaliser,* who acts almost as a Homeric angel of death, bringing violent justice to those (usually criminals) who have broken what he might call legal standards of honourable behaviour, undeniably part of the obligation of philoxenia. In these films, the wrongdoers are always afforded an opportunity by Washington's character to repent, to do the right thing and to save their honour and themselves. Of course, they never do. Their driving priorities of power, greed and ego are far too powerful, and they never see the true force of justice coming to meet them until it is too late. This film can be seen as having some element of Greek mythological import — a hand held out to the stranger, the offer of philoxenia, but when this offer is refused and the trust breached, a terrible and all-consuming display of wrath and liquidation follows.

In our current research world dealing with "hospitality", we are confronted with the many barriers to the sacred and traditional imperatives, which carry both negative and positive consequences dependent on whether philoxenia is observed or not. Some scholars have identified the hostility in modern notions or practices of hospitality (Minkkinen, 2007). In other words, the fear of the stranger (xenophobia) or the perception or limited nature of a financial transaction is the dominant element. When you take away the ability to pay, hospitality is revealed as inauthentic, or just an act. By reflecting on the origins and scope of philoxenia, we come to an understanding that this value is non-negotiable and cannot be limited without triggering unwanted and negative consequences.

In concluding, we can productively reflect on the value and insight that understanding the traditional sacredness of philoxenia, its unequivocal nature, its unconditionality contrasted with the intervention of barriers, of culture, of financial transactions, all of which introduce elements of barter and necessary conditionality. The notion that the stranger can have access to certain levels of hospitality for certain levels of payment is alien to the original and sacred duty of philoxenia. Therefore, when we are serious about building hospitality-driven organisations, we cannot allow equivocation, excuses, finances, fear, or ego in any form to prevent the moral and ethical force of philoxenia. When we do, we also take responsibility for the consequences and accept delivery of the Trojan horse in our midst.

Further research

How does understanding philoxenia assist in defining or curing dysfunctionality in hospitality service-scapes? Questions that could be asked by researchers might include:

(1) What is the cultural environment that secures and supports philoxenia?
(2) What are the barriers to practising and implementing philoxenia?
(3) Should aspiring hospitality professionals learn and adopt this definition of philoxenia as part of their hospitality DNA?
(4) Can philoxenia be learned or taught, or is it simply a question of individual nature or pervading cultural imperatives?
(5) Knowing its power is dependent on unconditionality, can we logically or reasonably aspire to philoxenia at all as a cultural pillar?

I would love to hear from others interested in or working on these topics.

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