

FROM ‘*HOSPITALITY*’ TO ‘*HOSTILITY*’: THE EVOLUTION OF *HOSTIS* AND THE NOTION OF ‘*PRIVATE*’ AND ‘*PUBLIC*’ ENEMY IN SLAVIC LANGUAGES

Alessandro Vitale

University of Milan, Italy

alessandro.vitale@unimi.it

In the paper the author analyses the origin of the words ‘hospitality’ and ‘hostility’ in the process of their evolution in the Indo-European languages.

Key words: *Indo-European languages, Latin, hostis, hospitality, hostility, origin, evolution.*

In his seminal work (on the vocabulary of Indo-European institutions) and his classic *Indo-European Language and Society*, Emile Benveniste described the problem of Latin definition of the enemy (*hostis*). He underlined the double meaning of the root of *hospitality*: *hostis*, meaning both ‘guest’ and ‘enemy’.

According to E. Benveniste, *hostis* carried the meaning of ‘guest’ (like its Gothic counterpoint *gast*) and only gradually took the meaning of ‘enemy’ (in the ‘public’ sense). As he explained, probably it occurred only later, but it was already during the Roman time when interpersonal or intergroup (“intercommunal”) relations of trust were replaced by abstract relations between impersonal political institutions – that *hostis* assumed the clear connotations of ‘enemy’. Henceforth, *hospitality*, intrinsically linked to the possibility of political *hostility*, became a drama of political choice and decision.

The classical meaning for ‘enemy’ must have been developed when reciprocal relations between clans or different small groups were succeeded by exclusive relations of *civitas* to *civitas* and even more intensively once communities evolved into large, modern sovereign states: at that stage the intimate relations between people, which were the basis of *hostis* as guest, were transformed into a suspicion of the *hostis* as a potential threat, as a ‘public enemy’.

In sum, interpersonal relationships as the basis of early community life were overthrown by the abstraction of inter-group relations and later by inter-state relations on the basis of sovereignty. Therefore, the originally positive sense of *hostis* in the Indo-European languages is gradually overcome in the development of anonymous states and regimes, especially after the appearance of the clear distinction between what is ‘inside’ and what is ‘outside’ political aggregations: the word *hostis* assumes a hostile flavor and it is applied only to the enemy. Benveniste’s theory has recently been criticized. However, the evolution of Slavic languages can help to solve this problem.