



# Hospitality in geopolitics and the making of Commonwealth international relations



Ruth Craggs

Department of Geography, School of Social Science and Public Policy, King's College London, Strand Campus, Strand WC2C 2LS, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

Hospitality is an important part of geopolitical practice. This paper focuses on the welcome given to Commonwealth dignitaries in London, UK in the 1950s and 1960s, and at an intergovernmental conference in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1979, in order to highlight the centrality of hospitality to post-colonial international diplomacy. These examples illuminate four key contributions that a focus on hospitality can make to our understandings of geopolitics more broadly. First, they point to the role of the welcome, hospitality and the host in staging political relations, and to the value of attending to hospitality that is conditional and instrumental in our research. Second, they highlight the need to go beyond the current focus on violence and exclusion in critical geopolitics, by illuminating the role of welcoming performances in a range of geopolitical contexts. Third, they elucidate a different set of spaces – bars, clubs, hotels and tourist sites – that form an integral, but often overlooked, component of political practice. Fourth, drawing on a broad range of literatures, including those around commercial relations, the paper proposes that hospitality – in contrast to dominant conceptualisations as either ethico-political position or embodied, economic and instrumental practice – is better understood as always moving and shifting between these poles. These contributions advance the field of critical geopolitics by highlighting international relations as performance: a conceptualisation that makes space for diplomatic labour, the construction of atmosphere, and the often uneven power relations that such performances embody.

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## 1. Introduction

Shortly after Ghana became independent in 1957, its first Prime Minister, Kwame Nkrumah, attended a reception held in his honour at what was then still known as the Royal Empire Society, a learned society and social club based in central London. Two decades later, the newly elected Prime Minister of the UK, Margaret Thatcher, attended a dinner held to welcome Commonwealth heads of government at the Intercontinental Hotel in Lusaka, Zambia, an occasion which culminated in a dance between her and Zambia's President Kenneth Kaunda. These two very different occasions provide insight into the role of hospitality, and its spaces, in international relations. Through a case study of diplomacy in the post-colonial Commonwealth, this paper extends political geography's engagement with hospitality beyond questions of refugees, rights to belong and state borders (see for example [van der Horst, 2004](#); [Bulley, 2010](#); [Gibson, 2006](#); [Mountz, 2011](#); [Darling, 2010](#); [Darling et al., 2010](#)), by focusing on Commonwealth elites and their hospitable performances. It draws on a broader set of literatures around hospitality than those often discussed in critical geopolitics, including that around commercial hospitality, in order to set

out a series of different ways in which hospitality is enrolled in the making and maintenance of international relations ([Bell, 2007](#); [Clarke, 2011](#); [Jayne et al., 2011](#); [Lynch et al., 2011](#); [Lugosi, 2007, 2009](#); [Megoran, 2010](#); [Vion, 2007](#)). Thus the paper sets out an agenda for a broader conceptualisation of hospitality in the field of critical geopolitics and in doing so makes four broader contributions.

First, it suggests the importance of attending to the *performance* of hospitality in terms of its contribution to building and maintaining relationships between nations in elite international relations. [McConnell et al. \(2012: 806\)](#) argue that there is a 'dearth' of research into the specific practices of diplomacy, and this paper highlights hospitality, including the role of hosting and the staging of the welcome, as one of these important but neglected geopolitical practices. It therefore elaborates how the idea of hospitality and its material practice and circulation can become a powerful political performance and ideological trope. I argue that in the search for the unanticipated and unplanned moments of welcome where a more open ethics of hospitality could be located ([Derrida, 2002](#); [Barnett, 2005](#)), critical geography has overlooked welcomes that are planned, staged and expected. However, these performances of hospitality are just as pertinent to the making and maintenance of the political relations. I suggest that we should not discount hospitable performances as superficial or irrelevant, but rather explore

E-mail address: [Ruth.craggs@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:Ruth.craggs@kcl.ac.uk)

precisely how – and with what effects – hospitality is deployed in elite political practice and beyond. This insight contributes to, and pushes forward, theorisations of performance in critical geopolitics by broadening understandings of what counts as meaningful geopolitical action.

Second, the paper suggests that we need to examine hospitalities and geopolitics in a different register. Writing about hospitality in the political realm has often examined inhospitality – moments when people are made to feel unwelcome, are excluded or ejected (in the context of migration and asylum) – rather than performances of welcome which are the focus of this paper. Likewise, critical geopolitics has often constructed the spaces it focuses on as violent (Harker, 2011; Koopman, 2011) and focused on war rather than the construction of peace, friendship and reconciliation (Megoran, 2010, 2011). Here, seemingly convivial moments of welcome are examined, and their crucial – but ambivalent – impacts are uncovered. Hospitality is shown to contribute *both* to the maintenance of uneven and violent power relations in the post-colonial Commonwealth *and* to the cessation of war and building of constructive international relationships after empire.

Third, the paper foregrounds a different set of spaces to those normally considered by scholars of geopolitics or the politics of hospitality: hotels, bars, clubs, and tourist sites, and highlights the important role of these spaces in international relations. Noting the centrality of these sites – and the commercial and conditional welcomes traditionally associated with them – in political practice highlights again the need to take seriously the often-neglected register of staged and instrumental forms of hospitality in research (Bell, 2007).

Fourth, and finally, the article illustrates the value of drawing on a wider set of hospitality literatures in order to grasp the performances, meanings, and experiences of hospitality in international relations. A focus on the practising of ethical and (geo)political positions through instrumental hospitality, and the commercial spaces associated with the hospitality industry, suggest that hospitality – often conceptualised as either ethico-political position towards the other, or embodied, economic and instrumental practice – is better understood as dynamic practice often moving and shifting between these poles (Lynch et al., 2011).

The example of the post-war Commonwealth is used to explore these issues. The ‘modern’ Commonwealth, an association of independent states emerging out of the decolonisation of the British Empire, was of one several political and cultural organisations in the post-war period which claimed to promote closeness, friendship and peace between races and nations. The ‘modern’ Commonwealth failed to become the internationally important organisation its proponents envisaged in the years after the Second World War, but it nevertheless played an important political, symbolic and visible role in the mid to late twentieth century, performing the continued relations between Commonwealth countries and people (Craggs, 2011a, 2011b). Here, the focus is on the performances of Commonwealth politicians and diplomats as ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’ in hospitable encounters, and to the work done by these encounters. In these examples, it is possible to explore hospitality in critical geopolitics in different registers – of convivial welcome rather than (at least overt) exclusion – and in different, commercial, spaces – hotels, bars and tourist sites rather than border posts, refugee camps and detention centres (Ramadan, 2008; Mountz, 2004).

Part two of the paper introduces current debates over performance in critical geopolitics and highlights ways in which diplomacy has been understood as theatre. Part three sets out the contours of current research into hospitality, noting that the concept has, thus far, been applied in quite separate contexts which can be usefully brought into conversation (Lynch et al., 2011), and suggesting how such a conflation can contribute to the understanding of hospitality in international relations.

Part four focuses on two case studies that illustrate the changing performances of hospitality that helped to underpin Commonwealth relations during and after decolonisation. In the first, the personal and institutional hospitality offered by a Commonwealth organisation in London – the Royal Commonwealth Society – to visitors from the Commonwealth is explored. Focus falls in particular on a visit by the Prime Minister of newly independent Ghana (formally the Gold Coast), in 1957. This year marked a watershed in British decolonisation; although India and Pakistan had become independent a decade before, it was only with Ghana’s independence (the first British colony in Africa to make the transition), that swift and comprehensive decolonisation in Africa began to seem like a reality. Thus this visit provides a useful moment to explore imperial and Commonwealth hospitality on the cusp of dramatic transformation.

The two decades following Ghana’s independence saw a widespread process of decolonisation across European empires, and the second example allows for an exploration of Commonwealth relations towards the end of this process, in 1979. Here, the focus falls on hospitality at a Commonwealth intergovernmental summit in Zambia. The shift in conference location from Britain – symbolising a post-colonial multipolar Commonwealth no longer centred on London – provides an opportunity to explore the changes in diplomatic relations within the association from the 1950s to the 1970s. This example is also important in the Commonwealth’s history – with the conference contributing to the decolonisation of Rhodesia (which became independent Zimbabwe in 1980).<sup>1</sup> Though very different, these examples illustrate the role of hospitality in performing elite Commonwealth relations against a backdrop of shifting geopolitical imperatives, and focus in particular on the interactions between British actors and those representing independent states that had formally been part of the British Empire.

Part five, the conclusion, argues that performances of hospitality are important components of political practice not only in the context of the international relations explored here, but also at a range of other scales and from the elite to the popular. It suggests that the dual focus in literature about hospitality: on ethics and power relations on the one hand, and on the material practices and labour of hospitality work on the other, offer opportunities to advance the field of critical geopolitics. By conceptualising international relations as performance, space is made for diplomatic labour, the construction of atmosphere, and the often-uneven power relations that such performances embody, within our accounts.

## 2. Performing geopolitics<sup>2</sup>

Within geography, classical realist accounts of geopolitics have over the last two decades been complemented and critiqued by a critical geopolitics literature that has conceived of geopolitics as the scripting of space through discourse and representation often driven by hegemonic power (Dalby, 2008; Dodds, 2007; Dittmer, 2010). More recently, there has been an important shift beyond the representational, and towards embodiment and performance

<sup>1</sup> These case studies draw on archival material, correspondence and oral history interviews collected as a part of PhD research funded by the AHRC and a further British Academy funded project (SG101471). Interviews with members of the Royal Commonwealth Society were carried out in the UK between 2006 and 2008; those concerning the Zambia Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting were conducted in Lusaka, Zambia, and the UK in 2011 and 2012. Archival material was taken from the Royal Commonwealth Society Collection at Cambridge University Library, the Commonwealth Secretariat Library and Archives, The Margaret Thatcher Collection at Churchill College, Cambridge, the Zambia National Archives and the private collection of journalist Derek Ingram.

<sup>2</sup> Performing Geopolitics was the title chosen for a recent two-day workshop held at the University of Durham 22nd–23rd June, 2011.

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