In this paper I elaborate on the importance of the ethics of hospitality we find in the work of Emmanuel Levinas to a politics of hospitality. Whereas this ethics is founded on unconditional hospitality, a politics of hospitality is always conditional. This conditionality inevitably engenders thematisation, generalisation and totalisation. As a result the uniqueness and otherness of the absolute other accounted for in the dual relationship is disregarded, at least to some degree. Nevertheless, to some extent, this conditionality is necessary for it guarantees reciprocity and the possibility for the subject to be an other for the others in the public/political realm. However, a politics of hospitality engenders violence, is violent in itself, if neither plurality nor the field of tension between judging an individual, unique situation and implementing general law is taken into account adequately. This phenomenon is thoroughly dealt with by political philosopher Hanna Arendt, according to whom plurality should always be acknowledged when constituting, interpreting and implementing law in order to prevent that general laws turn out to privilege some and deprive others.

The treatment of women refugees by Dutch asylum policy is exemplary for the violence engendered by a legislation that is indifferent to differences, to otherness. For one thing, no adequate account is given of specific problems, needs and risks of women refugees by this politics of hospitality.

Poignant cases of women refugees who end up in degrading and dangerous circumstances are approached rather as unpleasant by-products – ‘spin-offs’ – of a generally just and well-functioning policy than as appealing cases demanding critical reflection and radical change of the current politics. The works of both Levinas and Arendt offer valuable tools for criticising and revaluing a politics of hospitality, in this case the inhospitable Dutch asylum policy. Furthermore, especially Levinas helps pointing out that, positioning myself as a subject in society, I have to make up my mind. What do I have to do with justice? How do I respond to the appeal of the other who is done wrong? Even if this may lead to civil disobedience.