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The Politics of Belonging

Suzanne M. Hall

Introduction: the contemporary conundrum

We face a conundrum sufficiently pervasive in its planetary reach, and undermining in its human consequence, to substantially reduce the prospects of 'citizen' and 'nation' to a defensive and distrustful politics. The conundrum, as it is fervently evoked in election-time politics across the UK and Western Europe, is the assault of migration on the protection of national identity, despite deep economic interdependencies on the exchange of diverse ideas, skills and people. Historically, the large-scale reliance on abilities and labour from 'elsewhere' has accompanied processes of nation building in modern Western democracies, be it through the different projects of slavery, colonisation or urbanisation. Such nation-expanding endeavours were underpinned by the pursuit of economic growth reliant on substantial labour pools that could only be sustained from outside of national borders. Nonetheless, the management of degrees of citizenship for "the outsider" remained conditional, serving to prescribe the obligations of work while curtailing the prospects of belonging. The unselfconscious terminology of *gastarbeiter* or 'guest worker', for example, in the context of an expanding Germany economy in the 1960s, speaks to the unequivocal expectation that the migrant labourer will return to a homeland elsewhere.

However, the underlying presumption of a temporary and repatriable citizenship that has accompanied many modern nation-building endeavours across the UK and Western Europe, has proven to be a fraught and limited expectation. The economies of a highly mobile, uneven, and interconnected global world are more than ever dependent on an unprecedented scale and momentum of daily, weekly and generational migrations. Further, across-border movement is not limited to the promise of livelihood - it has a vivid, cultural dynamism that is actively reshaping experiences of belonging. The conundrum is therefore one of how to

engage in more connected and open processes of updating notions of belonging, when so much effort has been directed towards projects of protecting physical and perceptual borders. Inheritance, tradition and community are actively invoked in media and policy arenas as retrospective rather than forward-looking commitments. It is precisely within the obtuse nexus of preservation and encounter that Ash Amin locates his book, *Land of strangers*. Amin asks how diverse, modern, western societies 'hold together' and explores how a 'society of strangers' experience and compose the political and cultural gap between 'singularity and plurality'. Negating the ideology of tolerance as an ethics that distances, and the prospects of community as limited by parochial ties, Amin turns to here-and-now negotiations within wider fields of attachments between bodies, technologies and things.

In my commentary on *Land of strangers*, I focus on Amin's notion of a 'politics of the commons' to explore the rules, modes and forms of Amin's suggested plural attachments. I probe at the purchase of friendship networks, internet associations and affinities sustained by practice but not necessarily bound by place. The core question pursued in my commentary is not so much whether multifarious forms of interconnection provide for exploratory and participatory sociabilities; Amin convincingly argues that they do. But what can we glean about the politics of plural affinities - do more varied associations necessarily lead to more inclusive allegiances? And within diversifying societies, what structures and practices are required to advance a politics of the commons in everyday and institutional spheres? To expand on Amin's exploration of a politics of the commons, I make links to potentially constructive conversations between a constitutional commons (Taylor 2009) and an array of social solidarities (Calhoun 2003) that are foregrounded in structures and practices that recognise, sustain *and renew* the values of living with difference. Further, in living the stretch between local and broader affinities, I question whether the cosmopolitan and the vernacular are necessarily separate modes for updating our ways of belonging (Pollock 2000).

Amin and 'a politics of the commons':

In introducing the emerging possibilities for association and allegiance in a fluid and technologically proficient age, Amin refers to 'the new worlds of interaction'. He articulates a 'hub-and-spoke' (2012, p.17) metaphor where the individual is at the centre, navigating and accumulating a variety of attachments mediated not only through people but also through objects, networks and bodily practices. Importantly, the hub-and-spoke reflects the increasing multitude of opportunities for connection, and while the individual remains at the core, through the varied circuits of encounter and shared interfaces the possibilities for collective engagement and action is nurtured. The hub-and-spoke sociability emerges out of a series of contacts that is, Amin argues, more plural, more dispersed and more elective. There are new rules that govern these associations, as there are new possibilities for how individuals become 'collective subjects and caring citizens' (2012, p.32).

At the core of Amin's exploration is an animate and fully-fledged human being, capable of engaging with others. The essence that underscores productive engagement between strangers is *trust* and for Amin this demands purposeful and active exchange. Not unlike Appadurai's (2002) exploration of 'deep democracy', individual capacity and repertoire is insufficient without a collaborative project or shared stake. For the transaction to be advanced beyond the casual or individual exchange a cooperative endeavour is required. The syntax of trust between strangers develops through a shared orientation that is explicitly organised, and that is developed through repeated and reciprocal practices. In *Land of strangers*, Amin casts a wide net, and explores collaborations or processes of shared learning that extend from corporations and insurance claim floors, to craft workers and artisan workshops. Returning to the potentiality of the fully-fledged stranger, Amin argues that in the intersections of difference and through projects of collaboration, new prospects for renewal - both economic and cultural - are possible.

However, collaboration is not simply a cooperative endeavour, but also a circumstantial one and the ease of access to shared learning can be profoundly curtailed by inequalities. Alongside the increasing diversity of modern western societies is intensified economic disparity and prejudice in which many citizens are rendered less agile than others. Hence Amin's argument that for collaboration to be productive across deep divides, explicit orchestration is required. In earlier formations of Amin's notion of collaboration as set within economically uneven and racially agitated urban worlds, Amin (2002) refers to the 'micro-publics' of day-to-day worlds. While micro-publics are spaces of active encounter integral to everyday landscapes, they are distinct from either overtly private or public places of association. Amin turns away from housing estates and prestigious squares to schools, workplaces and youth clubs, where forms of membership require regular and invested participations that are activated by shared projects in which each member has a stake. At this scale of an everyday commons, the politics of belonging extends to questions of: who curates the curriculum; how are rules defined and adjusted; and in what ways are these shared projects more broadly recognised and progressed?

In *Land of strangers*, Amin proposes a more extensive common infrastructure underpinned by welfare to address inequities in the urban system and outlines: 'a network of public utilities, services, institutions, spaces and transit systems understood as a commons that keeps the city on the move, acts as a life support and opportunity field, ensuring that basic needs are met.' (2012, p.97). Amin goes further still, broadly calling for a range of interventions that build consensus in law and principle to challenge discrimination in its ubiquitous guises, and for an infrastructure that builds trust between strangers in the acts of making and doing. However, as Amin acutely portrays, ours is a paradoxical context (Back 2009), as plural as it is xenophobic, as exploratory as it is conservative. A 'planetary humanism' (Gilroy 2003) may well exist as both an ideological pursuit and as lived endeavours. But the paradox of being simultaneously dependent on and closed to diversity is sufficiently heightening across Europe, and discrimination is palpably growing through the politics of paranoia, to demand

that the scope and nature of interventions and infrastructures that Amin outlines are made more explicit. The principles of managing diversity need to be placed within accessible reach of reform, requiring dimensions of constitution, organisation, policy and programme to be further detailed. While the necessary ambition for more specifics is beyond the scope of any single book or intellectual project, it is useful to turn to parallel explorations of conceiving these details, to further probe at a politics of the commons.

The promulgated commons and institutional dimensions of belonging

For Taylor (2009), the incontrovertible reality is that society is diversifying, and within the lived processes of adjusting to change and renewing established conventions of allegiance and identity - be it through family, sexuality, or indeed citizenship - very different positions continue to emerge within western, democratic societies. Taylor focuses on the notion of secularism not as an opposition to religious authority per se, but as the contemporary institutional processes within the sovereign state, 'of managing diversity and the very different basic positions held in a society.' For Taylor this is a project that extends to the enshrinement of rights as much as it does to the renewal of culture. He expands on two primary goals for recognising and negotiating the array of societal positions and particularities: first, is the principle of maximum freedom of expression for all positions held in a society. Second, is an 'even handedness' or respect for different positions, particularly within institutions of the state suggesting that, 'the issue of diversity, rather than domination, has become our primary challenge.'

Freedom of expression and respect are hardly innovations within the broader spectrum of a 'planetary humanism' that advocates for an essential regard for differences, despite differing positions and perspectives. But Amin has a legitimate bone to pick with the cul-de-sac of ethical recognition, referring to the limits of a politics of 'in principle' tolerance as opposed to

more vivid forms of engagement that necessarily include both convivial and contested interactions. Moreover, morality or the advocacy of a 'liberal cosmopolitanism' has all too often been employed to legitimise the purge against differing global and local positions or what has been framed as illiberal nationalisms or fundamentalisms (Calhoun 2003).

It is in the vivid institutional arena of a democratic pluralism, where active processes of discussion and updating arise, that a crucial overlap between Amin's lived dimensions of 'productive collaborations' and Taylor's 'institutional neutrality' resides: 'solutions need to be renewed and renegotiated as circumstances and knowledge evolve [...] so that awareness comes to be shared, and decisions subjected to the jostle of competing perspectives and interests.' (Amin 2012, p.148). In Amin's parlance of how a society of strangers 'holds together', Taylor advocates for strong common reference points without a focus on democratic formulae. While both might argue that political centrism is 'too cumbersome and too remote' (Amin 2012, p.147), too reliant on convention and too distanced from particularity, significant effort will be required for institutions to revisit their bureaucratic modalities. What would contingent policies look like? On what common basis will trade-offs and re-workings be made? In short, how can we activate a framework of principles that work as shared, public reference points, but that are simultaneously procedurally cognisant of particularities?

The vernacular commons and practices of particularity and solidarity

It is to the dimensions of particularity that I now turn, to explore the diverse forms of solidarity that emerge out of 'densely acquired networks of familiarity' or 'local worlds' (Hall 2012). The purpose here is neither to privilege a version of pluralism that foregrounds what Amin refers to as 'dispersed affiliations' (2012, p.13), nor to accept the absolute distinction between cosmopolitan and local sociabilities. Contextual particularities allow for explorations of the

diverse *and* contradictory ways in which individuals and groups belong with respect to self and other. This is a messier pluralism that would acknowledge that social webs are formed through cultural opportunities and circumstantial limitations, freedoms and inequalities, localised and unbounded affinities. Calhoun's (2003, p.531) call is 'to make sense of the world as it is', and he pointedly asks, 'can cosmopolitan theory value humanity not merely in the abstract, but in the concrete variety of its ways of life?'. Calhoun conceptualises how 'social solidarities' challenge the widely held view of an opposition between the forms of affiliation that emerge from community (as located and presumably parochial) and those that form from the cosmopolitan (as nomadic and presumably more heterogeneous). Hence Calhoun aligns class, ethnicity and family, for example, alongside networks and coalitions, and although these overlaps might jostle against one another together they constitute a 'web of relations' (2003, p.536), a pluralism.

Without this contextualised view of pluralism, too many individuals and groups are analytically omitted from the challenges and prospects of living with difference and change; too many important processes of finding affinities and forging allegiances are too readily dismissed. Perhaps most significantly, it is those rendered most fragile and most immobile by change – the very old, the very young, the newcomer, the poor – whose stakes are often highly invested in local worlds, that need to be encompassed in the analysis and progression of pluralism. Here we might re-imagine Amin's hub-and-spoke metaphor, not as a free-floating assemblage, but as a composition with gravity, with a loose collection of proliferated pods attached to and deeply affected by particular contexts. The hub-and-spoke would necessarily distort, reflecting the mutable and at times contradictory ways in which individuals engage in their life-worlds and life chances. The challenge, then, is not necessarily how individuals detach from a local world, but how they are encouraged and supported to accumulate and belong in a *number* of local worlds:

Contact, I argue, refines our skills or capacities to socialise. The recognition of contact as a form of learning about difference requires a disaggregated view: a greater commitment to observing actual everyday life, and a willingness to acknowledge the variability and

plurality of informal memberships engaged in the small meeting spaces of the city (Hall 2012, p.109).

Histories and traditions would presumably further contribute to the gravity that distorts the hub-and-spoke, and here we would need to consider how the vernacular and past are integral to processes of transition and renewal; how long-standing practices travel in time and across space. Pollock (2000, p.620) distinguishes between 'preaching particularism' as a bounded insistence on origin versus 'being particular' as the emergence of local forms or practices that are refined through place, but not confined to it. Pollock opens up for us understandings of how the local travels, how the local communicates between large worlds and small places. In so doing, he offers us important cues for analysing the role of the local in sustaining, rather than resisting, processes of cultural renewal. First, is the understanding of how vernacular practices connect, rather than inhibit, locals to larger worlds. Then, against, the homogenising trope of assimilation, Pollock focuses on how local practices might resist political or cultural domination. Finally, it is crucial to consider what choices are available to individuals to participate in practices of transformation, and the extent to which inequalities in local spatial and social landscapes curtail capacities to participate.

Land of strangers and the politics of belonging

The conundrum acutely raised by Amin in *Land of strangers*, is how to re-orientate the politics of diversity and belonging, when there is a large and affective apparatus that contrives and maintains prejudice. The tyranny of disparate belonging within modern western societies is born not simply of political conservatisms, but also of deep economic hierarchies and inequalities. Together these contrive the multiple aversions to those outside of dominant economic and political orders: the terminology of the stranger, while fitted to the migrant, could just as readily be conferred on the poor. While governments on the left, certainly in the

UK under New Labour, have been softly spoken on matters of rising inequalities, they have been vociferous in joining forces with the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats on electioneering platforms, on matters of limiting immigration and protecting national identity. The language of 'Community Cohesion' (Home Office 2001) underpinned by assimilation remains at the forefront of initiatives to govern the challenges of living with diversity. However, politics of diversity and belonging, as argued by Bauman (2012) begins with an elemental regard for those rendered most fragile by change. A politics of the commons, outlined by Amin (2012) provides coherent principles for advancing our engagement with the realities of a diverse and disparate present:

1. The unapologetic protection of the vulnerable through an active and acute welfare state, which invests in, rather than retreats from, equitable access to the foundations of housing, health and education. As a state endeavour that encourages participation rather than paternalism, the process of building public investment in people requires decentralisation to accountable and agile public institutions.
2. A move beyond the out-dated politics of assimilation, towards an acknowledgement of allegiance as a multiple rather than singular coherence. A wider net of modes and forms of associations and platforms for engagement is foregrounded, where experimentation is encouraged through technologies and networks that are not confined by local boundaries.
3. Collaboration that provide a common project, in which citizens have an active stake, is an important means for building a diverse public as well as economic sphere. Central to the process of re-orienting narrow views of who belongs, is the project of making visible the very real contributions and diverse participations that both sustain and renew our cultures and economies. The convivial and productive investments made by a wide array of citizens needs to be acknowledged and communicated, through for example, the expertise and skills from far and wide that underpin our NHS and universities, as well as new urban economies and forms of knowledge.

4. Finally, I would like to add to the advancement of a plural democratic network, that experiments in empowerment and renewal are also integral to local life and local learning, such that the vernacular and tradition might be better understood and engaged with, as forward-looking rather than retrospective practices.

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