

## Book Review: Land of Strangers

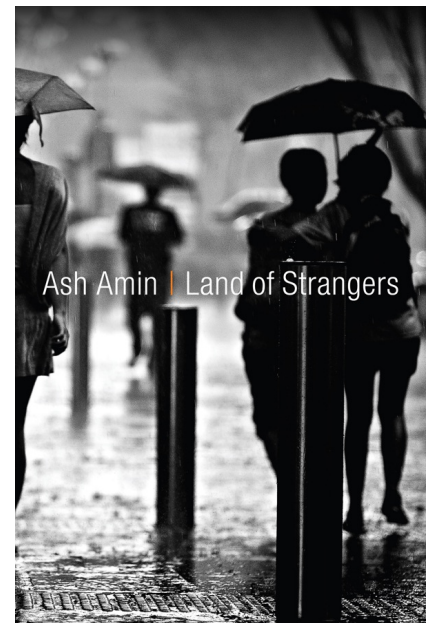
by Blog Admin

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*In **Land of Strangers**, Ash Amin presents an insightful exploration of the moral and material basis of how to nurture a sense of togetherness in a society of relative strangers. Judging recent trends of impersonal modern living as dangerous, this book considers relations that are not reducible to local or social ties in order to offer new suggestions for living in diversity and for forging a different politics of the stranger. Clive Barnett is not quite convinced, and had hoped for a more explicit vision of radical democracy.*

**Land of Strangers. Ash Amin. Polity Press. March 2012.**

It is common to hear concerns expressed that the twenty-first century public realm is in decline – that people have shrunk away from collective life into disconnected and impersonal enclaves, that social bonds are decaying and need to be rebuilt. It is in turn common to hear politicians and policy-makers and pundits call for the revival of community spirit and shared identities, a theme that has become an important emphasis in social policy initiatives for at least a decade or more, with a focus on enhancing integration, cohesion and interaction. Behind much of this concern, and many of these initiatives, is the idea that diversity, difference and pluralism is a problem of some kind, to which more community, more cohesion, more integration is the solution. Ash Amin's *Land of Strangers* is a social theory book with an explicit political vision, and it argues that attempts to address challenges of pluralism through policies premised on ideas of community, unity and identity are deeply problematic themselves. Amin's argument goes so far as to suggest that such approaches are poorly theorised when it comes to understanding the creative possibilities of difference and pluralism which they construe as problem.



In seeking to connect some of the most innovative strands of contemporary social theory to the task of rethinking the politics of togetherness in a society of strangers, Amin argues that any such politics cannot rest alone on an ethos of recognition and community – it requires institutional supports, embedded in material infrastructures of various sorts. The central critical device used is that of ‘the stranger’: a figure which has featured in an enormous amount of social science literature, representing those racialized and/or minoritized groups who are marked culturally and politically as others, as outsiders, and as threats. Amin offers a counter-argument by looking to relations that are not reducible to local or social ties, in order to offer new suggestions for living in diversity and for forging a different politics of the stranger.

The book consists of six chapters, each of which addresses one institutional or spatial field such as workplaces, communities, urban spaces or transnational spaces, in which relationships between strangers are negotiated, problematized, and transformed. The strong claim of the book is to “extend and supersede” a “sociology of ties” that has become ubiquitous in policy circles concerned with issues of community cohesion, social integration, and economic efficiency. This sociology of ties refers to the widely held assumption today that “the strength of interpersonal ties in a society has a direct bearing on its cohesiveness and the civic interest of its citizens” (p. 12). The precise range of academic work Amin has in mind here is never discussed in detail – one might expect at least a nod in the direction of Robert Putnam or other theorists of social capital, for example, but none is forthcoming.

In contrast to the sociology of ties, Amin develops the theme of “the freight of social ties”. By this, he means to draw attention to the ways in which social relations of community and identity are always

mediated – material infrastructures, organisational forms, technologies, and embodied dispositions and habits. Asserting the “materiality of transactional environments”, Amin argues that human relations are mediated by attachments formed with and through objects and things. There is a vagueness about the use of the concept “non-human” to make this argument – the term is used variously to refer to objects, symbols, technologies, organisations, as well as embodied dispositions that work below the level of conscious rationality. The paradigm of “human” to which each of these items stands as “non-human” is fundamentally different in each case. Without further clarification of the different types of difference which “non-human” can stand for, little progress is made in this book towards reconstructing a view of human capacities in light of all these varied non-human mediations, supplements and hybridizations.

In developing his argument, Amin extends adopts a range of recent cultural theory on the theme of ‘affect’. This work provides a general account of how social action is more often than not shaped by pre-conscious, embodied, subliminal dynamics rather than rational, deliberative ones. The uncritical reiteration of the dualisms that define contemporary affect theory allows Amin to develop a strong claim about the link between built and designed infrastructures and the enactment of social relations. Built environments, technologies and media function to inculcate a “collective unconscious” that works on people’s actions through subliminal factors and by triggering reflexes. On this view, social life is enacted through the more or less motivated generation of “contagious feelings” mediated by “atmospheric forces” embedded in designed infrastructures. This understanding of affect and materiality informs a working concept of the political as a surface of manipulation, in which various “silent fixes” are embedded behind people’s backs. So, for example, in the central chapter of the book, Amin provides a phenomenological conceptualisation of the “persistence of race” in contemporary social formations. Here one finds an account in which social interaction is overwhelmingly shaped by attachments that operate behind people’s backs and before they can think, in this case, in the form of a general claim about how racist dispositions are layered into embodied habits and institutional spaces. These can then, in turn, be re-activated in different conjunctures. For Amin, the war on terror has in large part succeeded in doing so, as evidenced by the rise of Islamophobia and more general practices of exclusion and sequestration of different categories of stranger.

The most provocative and challenging chapter of the book is the final one, ‘A Calamitous End?’. It picks up on a theme from earlier chapters in which a securitised regime of emergency, terror, apocalypse and catastrophe has spread across multiple fields of policy. Amin sees this new regime as displacing a previous providential model of public life, in which principles of avoidance and insurance predominated, replacing it with a catastrophic model in which principles of preparedness and resilience predominate. Amin lays out two very different interpretations of this emergent “politics of preparedness”. On the one hand, it has democratising potential in so far as it implies a redistribution of political responsibility amongst an engaged, virtuous citizenry. On the other hand, there is the dark interpretation in which the rise of apocalyptic scenario-planning and a public culture of emergency is seen as a process of ontological war, in which power is always effectively enacted to subject people to its own will. Amin does well to open up this difference, although he does not develop fully just what is at stake, conceptually and politically, in the difference between these two interpretations.

As a political book, *Land of Strangers* outlines a set of commendably moderate normative principles, what Amin calls “a politics of the midfield”. However, for this reader the book did not focus enough on what sort of action, mobilisation or organisation might contribute to the realisation of these principles (see Amin’s blog post on [Open Democracy](#)). However theoretically radical the ontologies Amin draws on may be, he does not present a vision of radical democracy.

*In April 2012, LSE Cities hosted **The Return of the Subject**: an event which launched Ash Amin’s book and discussed issues of hyper-subjectivity and desubjectification as the causes of contemporary escalations of violence. [Read more about the event and listen to the podcast.](#)*

*Responsibility* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). He blogs at [Pop Theory](#).

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