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Ash Amin, "Land of strangers". Cambridge: Polity, 2012, 200 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/72710)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2012

Ente di afferenza:

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Book reviews

Ash Amin, *Lands of strangers*. Cambridge: Polity, 2012, 200 pp.

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Ash Amin's *Land of Strangers* is an illuminating discussion on the fate of the stranger in modern Western societies, focussing both on the ways in which the Other is constructed as an outsider and the challenges of a society of strangers. Yet it also moves beyond this task to propose a more general reflection on modern Western societies. Genuinely interdisciplinary, and both analytical and normative, the book is a collection of essays with a clear common thread and an explicit polemical aim.

The principle target and starting point of the book is the peculiar and popular logic spurred by negative considerations on multiculturalism in the wake of 9/11. The "logic of the communal" promotes the strengthening of interpersonal and intercultural ties as an antidote to potential conflicts in the society of differences. Here the "encounter" is attributed a sort of thaumaturgic power against the challenges of the contemporary society of strangers and the roles of responsible citizens and collaborating communities are stressed. The foreign is doomed to be either domesticated or excluded. According to Amin, this logic, with its emphasis on the role of the "inter-human", is a dangerous misrecognition of the potential of the society of strangers.

Land of strangers proposes a reconsideration of the "phenomenology of the encounter" with a view to releasing the politics of belonging from the excessive importance given to strong social ties. The aim is to expand the set of affinities beyond face-to-face encounters, recognizing "cares and responsibility formed in material, technological, symbolic and imagined space" and to "defend a politics of difference formed around the impersonal, the openly disputed and the public" (pp. 6-7). This proposal is outlined through the inexorable deconstruction of clichés about living together in a society of strangers.

The turn towards a politics of interpersonal and communitarian ties does not emerge from nowhere, rather, it is the outcome of a long tradition of social scientific writing about the nature and role of social ties in modern societies. For this reason, the reader is first accompanied through a critical analysis of those approaches that have made the supposed loosening of social ties the interpretative frame of contemporary societies and a main sociological problem. What the author defines as the "freight of social ties" (chapter 1) affects both "sedentary" and "nomadic" interpretations of societies in liquid modernity, as the two "seek to restore the society of human obligations" (p. 15). The main issue is that a large part of contemporary human attachments, especially in their most "material" aspects, is systematically neglected by this literature. "Hub-and-spoke attachments", for instance, take shape in networks where the material and virtual, human and non human, visible and invisible are assembled "to form ecologies of human being and dwellings" (p. 19). Examples are software-aided global financial or terrorist networks, as outlined in the work of Knorr Cetina cited in the book. Likewise, writing on social ties has ignored the power of bio-political regimes in defining communities, membership and their qualities, as well as the role of "intimate publics": spaces of affiliation, other than interpersonal encounters, in which a dispersed population gather

around shared feelings (those who are not familiar with the concept of “intimate publics” may refer to the work of Laurent Berlant, cited in the book). In turn, Amin proposes a scheme of social belonging and civic interest “free from the obligation of recognition among strangers”. This may sound disturbing to those relying on the literature about the politics of identity, but the author is convincing when he clarifies that far from promoting a self-regarding and indifferent society, his is an invitation to take into account other “sites of conciliation and integration” (p. 33) such as those cited.

Questioning the relevance of recognition and trust is the central thread of chapter 2, where Amin shifts his focus to collaborative practices. Collaborative work is seen as able to produce the “alignment of strangers” and therefore to operate as the pulsing heart of the knowledge economy. Describing three different varieties of situated knowing and communities of practices, the author shows how processes of collective innovation do not require strangers to have close affinities with each other. The intriguing expression “togetherness without relational ties”, condenses and stretches to its limits the meaning of “relations among strangers” in the knowledge economy and cultures of innovation. Collaboration is a recently re-discovered topic in social thinking, as evidenced by Richard Sennett’s last book *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (Yale University Press, 2012). The latter focuses on the importance of face-to-face interactions and is more sceptical about the power of new technologies in collaborative work. Yet the two authors agree that collaboration requires skills that can only be achieved through practice, and that it is empathy, rather than sympathy, that forms the basis of cooperation.

The uneasiness with contemporary urban policies - which either aim at cleaning out spaces of co-habitation from unwelcome groups or to engineer human mingling in public spaces - pushes Amin to consider the issue of living with diversity and the role of public space in the city of strangers (chapter 3). Once more, and in this particular case less metaphorically, the author questions the necessity of recognition and proposes the idea of *convivium*, urban sociality not reduced to the properties of the encounter. Arguing for a re-materialized urban sociology, the author persuasively insists on the role of the urban infrastructure in shaping the quality of co-existence among groups in the city. At the same time, he stresses how the sites of civic and political formation are plural and scattered, and that we cannot expect public spaces “to fulfil their traditional role as spaces of civic inculcation and political participation” (p. 70).

Land of strangers’ reasoning continues with the phenomenology of racial coding (chapter 4). Here the author engages with the challenging task of explaining the persistence and return of the most discredited ideas of race, either in disguised or more explicit forms. A genealogical argument – racial coding of the past is rooted in the institutional and social unconscious – together with the analysis of the biopolitical regime in a given moment – the practices of management of the population by the state - can provide an answer to this puzzle. The critical moment of the chapter is devoted to anti-racist discourses. The author sustains that anti racist politics based on altering affective relations between strangers have serious limitations: “politics of human fellowship may be able to put a face to the malpractices” of racist biopolitics “but it lacks the means to stop or subvert the disciplinary routines” (p. 108). The reasoning here finds an example in the case of Europe, which is “trapped in harsh biopolitics of aversion towards the strangers”. Amin unpacks two different imaginaries of living with diversity in Europe: that which is

unfolding, the xenophobic Europe, and one still to be named – founded on the politics of strangers articulated around terms and conditions of sharing the commons, rather than provenance and subjectivity (chapter 5).

The last chapter is a ground-breaking, insightful analysis of imaginaries surrounding the role of risk in contemporary Western societies. Amin argues that the post 2nd world war idea of the possibility of a society being fully protected has given way to an apocalyptic imaginary grounded in a new technoculture of risk management. What was once “protection” is now “preparedness”. Catastrophism displays new modes of justification based on the rhetoric of preparedness and resilience, replacing that of avoidance and insurance. This new thinking implies responsibility to be shared among different actors, and a great social effort to be displayed in coping with uncertainty and adversity. The author questions the potential of democratization inherent in this new discourse of risk management. According to Amin, in fact, “preparedness” is an “ontological war” in which a culture of calamity can legitimate the reordering of the world, the imposition of rules, changes in the standards of governing life and the suspension of democracy. In a future reframed as apocalyptic and a world full of perils, draconian interventions to alter the conditions of emergence have all the power over the most vulnerable and undefended sections of society.

The strength of *Land of strangers* undoubtedly lies in its powerful deconstruction of clichés so deeply rooted in both policy and academic discourses. The way in which the politics of “befriending the stranger” and the tyranny of the encounter are put on the spot through informed and sharp arguments is fascinating. However, the reader is left unsatisfied with the constructive part of the book. Its aim is indeed explicitly political, yet, paradoxically, the political answer remains vague and mild. Different proposals are scattered throughout the book as an antidote to disciplinary and exclusionary practices that have come to the fore since 9/11. Amin makes the case of the well-functioning city, where welfare, rights and accessible public spaces prevent the blaming of the stranger, and social Europe as “the counterweight to neoliberalism and racial biopolitics” (p. 135). But no clear explanation is provided about how this could be achieved and who could be the mobilizing forces behind the change. In this sense, a clearer and more defined proposal would have been the crowing achievement of the book given its radical and engaging criticism. Notwithstanding, this small remark is no hindrance to the fact that *Lands of strangers* is a highly recommendable book, not only for those specifically interested in issues about the society of strangers, but for all those concerned with the fate of Western modern societies.

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