

BOOK REVIEW

Ash Amin *After Nativism: Belonging in an Age of Intolerance*

ANGHARAD CLOSS STEPHENS 



CONTRIBUTOR

Angharad Closs Stephens is Associate Professor in Human Geography at Swansea University.

Address: Swansea University, Geography Department, Singleton Campus, Swansea

Email: a.c.stephens@swansea.ac.uk

Submitted on: 7th July 2025

Accepted on: 25th July 2025

Published on: 31st October 2025

Article Number: 2.12



Ash Amin (2023). *After Nativism: Belonging in an Age of Intolerance*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 210 pp. ISBN: 978-1-509-55732-5

How do we rebuild a public sphere, unruly and fragmented as it must be, as a meeting place of multiple forms of togetherness, to ward against the most hateful and anti-democratic tendencies of the digital public sphere? This is one of the questions Ash Amin asks in his timely new book, *After Nativism* (2023: 5) – a guidebook to a myriad ways of imagining community in shared futures beyond the insularity, violence and racism of populist nationalism. What is nativism? Whilst it may take many forms, it ‘thrives on claiming that the ‘people’ have been abandoned by a detached liberal or social democracy serving elite and ‘anywhere’ interests’ (2023: 21). True to form, Amin moves seamlessly across disciplines, and digs deeply into the survival stories of the urban poor, to present us with a euphony of concepts that may yield alternatives to populism. As in his other books (Amin and Thrift, 2002, 2017; Amin, 2012), Amin unfurls several of his images, concepts and ideas from a fragment about everyday life. Consider the following examples of ‘plural geographies of attachment’: a form of belonging based on ‘co-occupancy and encounter’; ‘hybrid kinships and rhizomatic connections’ between humans, animals and plants. Then imagine the nation formed less around a sense of shared identity of values and more as ‘a compromise of overlapping interests and shared practices’, ‘a space of conciliations’, or ‘zone of engagement’. This is only a small sample of the plethora of terms, images and concepts on offer in the book. Across four chapters, an Introduction and Coda, this book squarely faces the challenge of rising nativist nationalism, and asks what kind of political movements and understandings of citizenship, can be attractive, relevant and robust enough to form a counter-narrative of belonging.

This book was published one year prior to Donald Trump winning a second term as President of the United States in November 2024. It is well-timed: possibly prescient. These elections took place mid-way through my Political Geographies course at Prifysgol Abertawe – Swansea University, and so the students and I set aside time in one class to discuss the results. I gathered an additional reading list of some of the structural, affective and historical features of Trumpist nationalism (Anderson and Secor, 2022; De Genova, 2018; Shilliam, 2018); but *After Nativism* was one of the few texts that asked, where do we go from here? Amin argues that the cosmopolitan imaginaries of the 1990s and 2000s and the civic accounts of nationalism made popular in the same period lack the effective force needed to counter populist nationalism. Indeed, both moral patriotism and nativism share a problem, in that they cannot sufficiently respond to the world that we find ourselves living in, and the shape of the geographical challenges that we must respond to. The multicultural and cosmopolitan narratives which gained traction in the UK, Canada and Australia in this period, and which following 9/11, quickly revealed their limits (Fortier, 2008; Razack, 2008), now belong to a distant past. Where then do we look to for alternative imaginings of community? Rather than throw away past efforts, Amin reworks various initiatives and achievements to present a new lexicon of critical concepts, formed from the grounds that the established ideas of community are insufficient in confronting new populisms.

In the first two chapters, ‘Grounds of Belonging’ and ‘Street Affinities’, Amin finds inspiration in fragments of stories collected from migrant European cities, and in the stories of attachment that he develops from

conversations with the urban poor in a Delhi slum and homeless strip. We might consider this second chapter—the most stunning in my view—as an updated, and deepened version of Doreen Massey’s ‘global sense of place’ (1991), and more fitting to an era of increasing inequalities and geopolitical tensions, where cosmopolitan belonging is framed less as a progressive way of living, and more as unavoidable, for the multilingual, multi-skilled urban poor live their lives under conditions of profound precarity and hardship. The book introduces different languages for endurance, including the Hindi word ‘*majbuti*’, meaning inner strength and resolve, and ‘*shakti*’, meaning ‘a quiet strength of managing hardship and responsibility’ (2023: 61–66). Amin discusses the role of women as ‘carers, workers, providers and planners’ (2023: 65), how the ‘familiarities of place’ help people to navigate their daily woes, as they live with, or care for others living with dependencies and addictions, as well as severe mental health conditions. The book moves between such stories from Delhi, and stories of cosmopolitan belonging in peripheral and ‘left-behind’ British cities, such as Ben Rogaly’s ethnographic work on working-class Peterborough (2000), and Anoop Nayak’s work on the white masculinities of Northern England (2017). Chapter three takes on the urgent challenge of reimagining ‘The Intimate Public Sphere’, in the context of how nativist politics has been able to exploit digital technologies, which are ‘stacked up in favour of the powerful sectional and corporate coalitions’ (2023: 99), to amplify distrust of expertise, science, liberal principles, as well as new and old racisms. Chapter four, ‘Aesthetics of Nation’ addresses the affective and aesthetic politics of nation-building, and points to how artistic projects can reorient public feelings of anger towards the commons (2023: 153). Together, these fragments suggest a new image of planetary belonging, formed from how people actually live jettisoning the ‘romance of oneness’ (2023: 141).

Amin presents something different to most current analyses of what the left now needs to do. This is because most analyses of the new, Labour government in Britain (elected July 2024), and on why Kamala Harris lost the presidential election to Donald Trump (Harris, 2024; Brooks, 2024), focus on how governments need to return to ‘delivering’, and ensuring people’s material and economic security. However, Amin argues that nativism won’t be defeated on economic grounds alone. This may seem a minor point, but it is far-reaching, and in-keeping with the analyses of Hannah Arendt, Achille Mbembe and others, who suggest that hate, evil, violence will not be held at bay through economic prosperity alone. As Amin puts it: ‘*disarming nativism will require more than assuring the material and existential security of the left-behind disenchanted with liberal democracy*’ (2023: 3, my emphasis). What we need is a ‘counter-aesthetics of belonging’ (Amin, 2023: 6), set in a broader affective sphere of shared concerns, and common address of the dangers we face; slowly displacing the centrality of worn tropes of sacred nationhood and its fictive enemies. The fragment, as method and approach in this book, succeeds in keeping the ideas light, conversational, and energising in their effect. Overall, this book makes a positive, lively and sincere attempt at reworking the ideas and principles of truth, public debate, democracy, rule of law, expertise, critical media and living together for these new times: times that demand them to be fought for anew.

Competing interests

The author is Managing Editor of Agoriad: A Journal of Spatial Theory.

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