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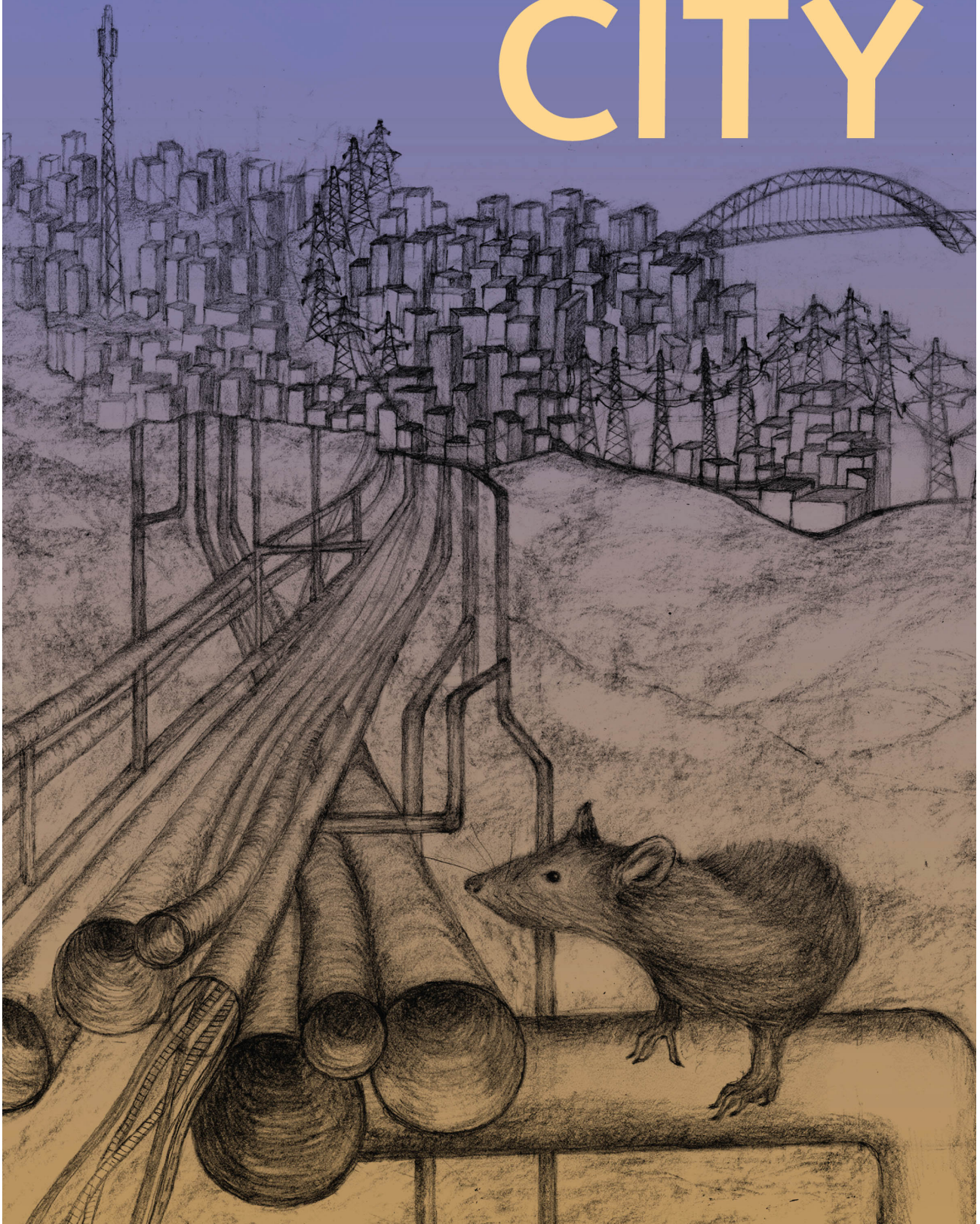
# SEEING LIKE A CITY BY ASH AMIN AND NIGEL THRIFT

REVIEWED BY MICHELE LANCIONE

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# ASH AMIN & NIGEL THRIFT

# SEEING LIKE A CITY



Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Seeing Like a City*, 2016, 216pp., Cambridge: Polity. hardcover and paperback ISBN 978-0-7456-6425-5

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## There is Nothing Like the City

Published fifteen years after *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, *Seeing Like a City*, is a testament to the evolution of Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift's urban thinking. The two books are, in a sense, part of the same intellectual project: one that aims for a wholesale reconsideration of how urban scholars of various disciplinary backgrounds approach the city. *What is*—again and again—this thing we call “city”? *How* do we approach it? *How* do we deal with it, theoretically and methodologically? If the task of reconsidering ways of approaching these and other questions was already ambitious in the first of the two books, *Seeing Like a City* is perhaps even more audacious and therefore potentially controversial. This time Amin and Thrift go right to the center of the urban question. They are no longer primarily concerned about “how to think the city”, but also about “what to do with it.” Where to go with the ‘city’? What can it portend? What can be done? *Seeing Like a City* is, therefore, first and foremost, concerned with the *politics of the city*.



The account that Amin and Thrift give of such a politics is in line with some of their previous works (Amin, 2012; Amin and Thrift, 2013), which have been criticized for being not radical enough and for edging toward a liberalism of sorts (Barnett, 2012; Smith, 2005). Previous critics will not find peace in this new book. In *Seeing Like a City*, there is no sign of pre-established narratives of urban processes, planetary orientations, or mechanical readings of capitalized urban circuits. This does not mean that those processes or circuits are dismissed as irrelevant. Instead, the book calls for a re-imagination of how they—and many other things—function in the everyday life of the incredibly layered mechanospheres we call cities. Attempting such a reconsideration, and orienting it toward the fundamental question of “what do we do with the city”, is a hit and miss process. To be clear, I do believe that Amin and Thrift are “missing” something important in the outlining of their urban politics. However, instead of seeing the drawbacks of their account as fundamental flaws, I prefer to read them as productive tensions that unavoidably arise from the heft of the proposed reconsideration. *Seeing Like a City* is about doing urban theory without the safety net of established narratives, in the hopes of grasping new viewpoints from which to see the urban corners, patchworks, and dynamics that are either over-simplified or utterly dismissed by mainstream scholarship.

### **The belvedere of city-life: machinic infrastructures**

One of the central ideas of this book is a rather simple one: cities are held together by infrastructures, and it is only by valuing—theoretically and pragmatically—the work that infrastructures do that a renewed urban politics might be conceived. I describe this as a simple idea because it is intuitively correct. When one says that “nothing works in this city,” one usually refers to infrastructural arrangements such as bureaucratic procedures of various kinds, systems of traffic control, provisions for water and electricity, waste collection, and so on. It is therefore intuitive to say that infrastructures are key for determining the politics of the city—that is, for determining whether life is possible or not in a particular urban setting.

What is less intuitive is defining what infrastructures are and what they do together, as an ensemble. How do infrastructures do what they do, and how do they do it as they constantly intersect? Amin and Thrift's book is less about "infrastructures" per se and more about what DeBoeck calls "knotting" (De Boeck, 2015), or the refrains (Guattari, 2013) generated by the interplay or infra-making of infrastructures (Lancione and McFarlane, 2016). This is what Amin and Thrift refer to as the "machinic" aspect of infrastructure: the capacity of infrastructural arrangements to bring together all sorts of human and non-human actors in their doings and to generate new urban forms in their becoming.

A key point in Amin and Thrift's approach to the city is about this "vitality" of the urban machine. This vitality is a "machinism" that goes beyond what we can perceive and beyond what we can think: the city *thinks*, in its variety of modes of existence, independently of us (Chapter 3). Crucially, that thinking, its life, affects us deeply—in the fundamental sense of contributing to the making of who we are: beings assembled in, with, and through the time and space of the city. This is the "machinism"—the assemblage of bodies, infrastructures, modalities, and orientations—that makes the city *alive* (Deleuze, 2001): a composite of stuff that does things and that makes things do other things, as in the case of the grids of matter and dispositions that allow me to type on this computer at this moment in time, in the comfort of my insulated home, with my body protected from the cold and rainy Welsh summer by heat and electricity, which in turn produce pollution of various kinds and which are bound to other socio-technical financialized infrastructures made of waged labor, unbalanced credit-cards, and subliminal mortgages propositions, to cite just a few of the urban machinisms at play as I type this review.

In approaching the city and its life in this way, one realizes the different political project of this book. It is not anymore, or not only, about the political economy of capitalism *in* the city, but about the city's ecological (in the sense of multiple ecologies of life) modes of existence (Latour, 2013), which are for the most part axiomatized by capitalism, but which need to be understood in terms of their forms and functions *before* a grained critique of their axiomatization is even conceivable (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). To put it differently, the machinic life of the city generates both opportunities and constraints that, to be fully grasped, need a fine understanding of the "machinic" first. This is what traditional urban studies, often too focused on policy-descriptivism or grand-criticism, is largely missing. It is the "understudied republic" of the infrastructure of the modern city that can become, according to Amin and Thrift, "the main focus of political action" (6).

## Arts of the urban political

*Seeing Like a City* does not stop at the theoretical reframing of city life and infrastructural becoming. It also offers orientations that might allow us to grasp the potential that that reframing opens or to “activate” the politics of urban infrastructures. In what follows I will briefly recall three of them and then turn to what I think is still missing from Amin and Thrift’s account.

### *Knowing the city*

The first (re)orientation is epistemological. If, as Amin and Thrift contend, the study of the contemporary city—the city of the Anthropocene—is the study of *how* infrastructures of all kinds make things circulate, associate, and dis-associate, then *how* can we research, understand, and govern *all* this stuff? Amin and Thrift are quite adamant in saying that we cannot, at least not conventionally. For them, the intricateness of urban life requires a tripartite act: (a) blurring boundaries between disciplines and expertise to better grasp the nuances of urban machinism; (b) encouraging a “new vision of the world that gives all things a constituency” (90); and (c) denouncing the inoperability of *any* kind of “universal standard or objective method” (31) (similarly to what feminist theory has sustained in relation to positionality, see Haraway, 1988). The city can only be defined, studied, and governed in the impossibility of its univocal definition. Cities in this sense consist

“ not only of human-scale thoughts and practices but also of all manner of modes of sentience with their own timelines and modes of intervention in the world. None of them is necessarily consistent with the others but each of them is able to interfere with each other because their parts do not have to become a single whole: city never becomes City. (60)

Urban grand-theory is no longer possible. Neither is encompassing urban governmentality. Urban studies, if made of disconnected specialisms, will follow the same fate. The only way out is cross-disciplinary contamination, partial knowledge, and experimentation: a kind of urban knowledge that is rarely seen in contemporary urban scholarship and policy.

### *Infra-makings of prosperity and poverty*

The second political reorientation offered by a focus on urban infrastructure is related to the matter of prosperity in cities (Chapter 4). In other words, it concerns one of the quintessential questions of urban studies: the economic processes of the urban. In line with their works in economic geography, Amin and Thrift take a stance with the idea that “the competitive advantage of cities stems from the *spatial concentration* of people, firms, and institutions constituting the supply and demand base for growth, efficiency, and innovation” (101, emphasis added). What matters, they say, is not agglomeration per-se, but how these agglomerations are affected by the multiple networks, flows, agencies, and material provisions sustaining and composing them. It is, in other words, the “overall spatial dynamic” (102) of each agglomeration that affects its economic possibilities. The city in this sense is not a grid where this or that element can be activated to boost economic growth, but a series of infrastructural arrangements that may allow—through their only partially controllable machinism—for the economic potential of cities.

That potential, Amin and Thrift argue, needs to be understood in infrastructural terms: it is the potential of the whole city, not of the few (Amin et al., 2000). The authors arrive at this conclusion not from the starting point of universal rights but from their very understanding of *urbanity*: if the city is about the crisscrossing of urban infrastructures, its prosperity can only be viewed as something concerning the whole of that meshwork rather than some (only apparently singular) parts. Prosperity then is not a matter of “engineering” this or that “economy of proximity” (116), but the work of re-centering infrastructures as *the* question of urban economy. Substantially, if one looks at the way in which things are constituted in the city, infrastructures are already, by definition, a public matter: they pertain to the life of each urban body. The real challenge—the politics that comes to the fore—is to re-orient their management in that public direction too.



A reaffirmation of the *public* nature of infrastructure is also the point that Amin and Thrift make when it comes to the question of poverty. This is the third reorientation offered by the book, one concerned with the framings of poverty, or with the ways through which poverty is understood, narrated, and acted upon. One of the dominant framings of poverty is the capabilities approach and the related international consensus against entitlements for the urban poor. Amin and Thrift contend, however, that ‘capabilities’ are always assembled with the infrastructure of the city. If one takes urban machinism seriously, human capabilities cannot be seen as a matter of bounded human subjectivity and personal entrepreneurship, since they are, always and by definition, made and remade with and through the city. It is indeed in the infra-making of infrastructures that urban life at the margins is (un)made, across multiple locales both in the North and the South (Lancione and McFarlane, 2016). It follows that a politics of prosperity for the urban poor can only be one where access to fundamental infrastructural provision is brought once again to the fore, as the condition sine-qua-non of any “empowerment” or sustainable “resilience.” The energies spent in the everyday ‘make-shifts’ of infrastructures by the urban poor (Simone and Pieterse, 2017) needs to be rechanneled, or liberated (Guattari, 2009), by the public re-provisioning of basic urban exoskeletons.

### Acting like a city

Amin and Thrift propose a vitalist account of the urban because they “see” *life* “like a city”: urban life as something emerging from machinic connections, which are more than the sum of their parts and more than what humanists can think of them. In following this line of the enquiry—in seeing life like a city—we are offered a fresh viewpoint on the urban, which in turn can generate new orientations regarding its struggles and opportunities. These orientations can be used to understand cities better but also, as Amin and Thrift do at various points in the book, to argue for a concrete politics of urban infrastructures made of, among other things, re-valuing and re-centering maintenance and repair; re-thinking who is “who” in democratic accounts of urban life (to include non-human lives); retraining engineers and urban thinkers to account for *earthly* complexities; re-thinking the scope and scale of urban change; and more.

The book, however, could say more about the actualization of these orientations and their related politics. There is still a gap between the “here-and-now” of conceptual reframing and a future made of a substantive public engagement with infrastructures. How do we get from where we are to where we would like to be? While one can argue that it is not the role of academic enquiry to be prescriptive, some clarity about the “how to” of political practice is not only needed, but also fundamental to enrol, to activate and to make-shift alternative urban futures. What would it be to *act like a city*?

To put it more bluntly, Amin and Thrift could have been more explicit about the kind of *ethos* guiding the *re-orientations* that they evoke at various points in the book. What kind of political modality might allow for the politics of infrastructure? Amin and Thrift seem to contend that traditional, parliamentary, politics has failed in this regard. Urban governments of various sorts and sizes cannot understand the make-shift or grasp the machinic—they are arborescent moles in a world of micropolitical molecules (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). At points, they seem to embrace the idea that, given the horizontal complexity of life, only a seemingly anarchic ethos could potentially serve the many instead of the few. According to them we are, indeed, confronted with “an ontological incompleteness that allows for no sovereign force” (167). However, both here and in other writings (Amin and Thrift, 2013), they do not *fully* explore the alternative modalities that may allow for the politics of infrastructure to flourish. I suspect that a closer engagement with the modes-of-existence of grassroots politics at the urban margins, which include practices as variegated as squatting (Vasudevan, 2015) and organizing (Purcell, 2013), would push the act of “seeing” like a city into an even more radical plane of thought and action.

To conclude, Amin and Thrift’s contribution is an important one because it pushes urban scholars out of their comfort zones, even more so than their 2002 *Cities* did. *Seeing Like a City* invites the reader to tackle fundamental urban questions—of epistemology, economy, and marginality—from a radically new perspective: one attentive to the (un)makings of infrastructural life and its immanent potential. The book is not easily digested nor comfortable, but that is a small price to pay for a contribution that offers a rare opportunity to reimagine what urban studies and politics can and should be.

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