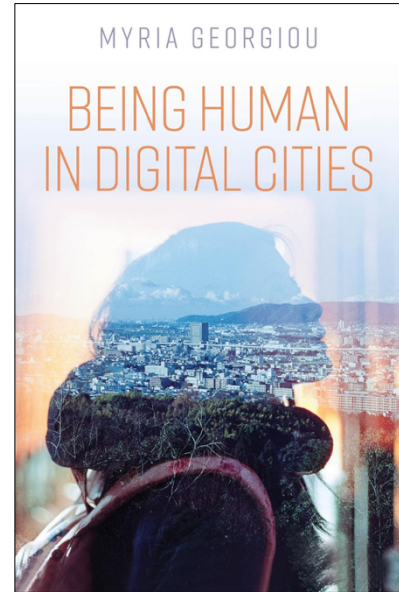


Myria Georgiou, **Being Human in Digital Cities** (1st ed.), Newark, NJ: Polity, 2024, 196 pp., \$69.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Soojung Paek
George Mason University, USA

Cities have long been sites of contestation, evolving from the visible spatial struggles of early industrialization to the more abstract and diffused conflicts of digital urbanism. In ***Being Human in Digital Cities***, author Myria Georgiou examines how “the right to the city” can be realized in contemporary digital cities through a critical humanist lens (p. 54). Lefebvre (1991) asserted that space is socially produced (p. 26). In another work, Lefebvre (1996) conceptualized “the right to the city” as a demand for a just and inclusive urban life in early urbanization (p. 158). Harvey (2012) extended this critique to neoliberal urbanization, where capitalist surplus absorption and control shape urban spaces. Georgiou turns to the new, complex inequalities that emerge within digital cities. She characterizes the digital city as “par excellence a post-neoliberal project” (p. 10), one that paradoxically fuses market economics with datafication and the rhetoric of diversity, sustainability, and inclusion in urban societies. Operating within the same capitalist logic, digital cities introduce more ambiguous and ambivalent forms of inclusion and exclusion, which Georgiou explores through plural and contesting forms of humanism. In doing so, she recenters the human—not technology—as the core of digital urban life. Digital change, she argues, has shifted from a neoliberal technocratic paradigm to “a post-neoliberal promise of rehumanized cities” (p. 12).



The book is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 sets out the central inquiry: how life in digital cities is changing what it means to be human, emphasizing the necessity of recentring the human in digital scholarship to fully grasp the workings of power in digital urban structures. Chapter 2 introduces three competing humanisms that challenge the idealized, universal humanism promised by digital cities. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 explore one of these frameworks in depth—popular humanism, demotic humanism, and critical humanism—laying the groundwork for a nuanced critique of the ideological digital order.

While analyzing diverse technologies and infrastructures of digital cities, including wireless networks, digital platforms, AI, GPS, and datafication, Georgiou moves beyond technological aspects to explore the broader complexities of digital cities in relation to humanity. She defines the digital city as both a symbolic and material construct, shaped unevenly across different regions through the convergence of three key forces: governance and infrastructure, sociotechnical imaginaries, and lived experience.

To understand the complex convergence within digital cities, Georgiou employs a multimethod approach that includes discourse analysis, interviews, and participatory methods and examines

governance, representation, and everyday experiences in digital cities. Her comparative study spans eight cities across the Global North and South—London, New York, Los Angeles, Berlin, Seoul, Songdo, Athens, and Havana—tracing the relationship between technology and human progress across both urban and transurban geographies.

Georgiou contends that digital cities operate within an ideological digital order that adopts the language of humanism—promising human progress, connection, freedom, and sustainability. This rhetoric presents digital urbanism as more inclusive and human-centered than its industrial and neoliberal predecessors. However, this rehumanization is selective, privileging digitally enabled citizens while simultaneously marginalizing and excluding others. To expose this dynamic, Georgiou introduces three competing forms of humanism—popular humanism, demotic humanism, and critical humanism. These frameworks reveal the underlying “rehumanization-dehumanization dialectic” (p. 46) within digital cities and advocate for a more inclusive right to both the physical and digital city.

Georgiou develops her argument starting from popular humanism to demotic humanism and critical humanism. Popular humanism is the discourse mobilized by powerful actors, such as the state, corporations, and the media, to promise digitally mediated progress. This digital order incorporates humanist values into digital cities by using rhetorics and performances, presenting digital cities as “greener, more equitable, and diverse urbanism” (p. 42) in policy documents, advertisements, news, and corporate strategy documentation. However, while promising progress and addressing urban injustices, popular humanism strategically contains these efforts within narrowly defined solutions that bypass deeper structural issues, resulting in what Georgiou calls a “visibility of inequalities . . . without responsibility” (p. 97). Ultimately, rather than fostering genuine inclusion, popular humanism serves as a cultural justification for a digital order that privileges “digitally capable” (p. 8) humans while marginalizing those deemed unworthy or unable to participate. This selective rehumanization dehumanizes those excluded from digital cities. A stark example is Singapore’s digital COVID-19 campaign, which revealed the necropolitical dimension of the digital order where integration into the digital world became a condition for survival, leaving those unable to comply to face severe, even fatal, consequences.

In response to this top-down model, demotic humanism turns to the everyday, bottom-up practices of urban humans as digital users. It reveals the city as an unstable and liminal space for *being* and *becoming human*. Demotic humanism centers urban humans in the ongoing struggle between control and openness, recognizing humans as individual and collective actors in shaping digital urban life. This tension is evident in cases such as the streets of Havana, where people gather outside luxury hotels to get Wi-Fi connections, or in the experiences of migrants in cities who benefit from digital connectivity while simultaneously becoming objects of surveillance. These examples show contradictions within demotic humanism, where the digital order and human agency coexist. Georgiou distinguishes between two modes of struggle in digital cities: *being human* for those with relative privilege and *becoming human* for those whose humanity is continually denied. In this framework, digital cities are not stable but contested, shaped by both everyday resistance and exclusion.

Critical humanism challenges the hegemonic order of popular humanism, offering both an analytical and normative approach to understanding and resisting the incorporation of humanity into

corporatized digital cities. Rooted in critical scholarship, it critiques the selective rehumanization and ongoing dehumanization within the digital order, advocating instead for a humanism centered on dignity, autonomy, and freedom. To rethink cities beyond the constraints of the digital order, Georgiou outlines nine guiding values: radical (challenging power), pluriversal (rejecting ideologically universal), political (as a political claim), not Luddite (embracing technological change while reclaiming spaces of freedom), situated (attuned to temporal and spatial contexts), de-Westernizing (decentering Eurocentric perspectives), historicized (recognizing the long entanglement of technology and humanity), environmental, and hopeful (envisioning diverse pathways to humanization). Movements such as Black Lives Matter exemplify critical humanism in action, reclaiming urban and digital spaces to demand safety, dignity, and justice.

As digital cities grow increasingly ambivalent toward humanity, it becomes more difficult to identify who is excluded and how exclusion operates. With the rise of new technologies shaping urban life, we may need to rethink what it means to be human and reassert a different kind of right to the city. Georgiou's plural forms of humanism provide a critical framework for examining these evolving dynamics, exposing how popular humanist values are embedded within digital urbanism in ways that obscure structural inequalities. While popular humanism reinforces the ideological digital order, demotic humanism reveals the complexities of human agency within these spaces. Critical humanism serves as a direct challenge to the hegemonic digital order, insisting on a human-centered approach that resists technological determinism and corporate control. By offering epistemological, theoretical, and methodological tools, critical humanism helps uncover and resist the ways in which digital cities disguise or deny humanity, advocating for a more inclusive and just digital urban future.

While the book's theoretical breadth and empirical scope are impressive, and its triad of humanisms provides a compelling analytical lens, the emphasis leans more toward diagnosing patterns and dynamics than outlining concrete avenues for implementation. Some readers may wish for further examples of how critical humanism could inform policy or practice to reshape the gears of the digital order in the future. Nevertheless, Georgiou's work is a significant contribution to debates on digital urbanism, powerfully reminding us that any vision of the future city must be measured by the extent to which it safeguards human dignity, freedom, and agency.

References

- Harvey, D. (2012). *Rebel cities: From the right to the city to the urban revolution*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Lefebvre, H. (1996). *Writings on cities*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.