

Special Issue
Engineering the Future Sociologically:
a Call to Delve into Environmental
Education Enhanced by
Technological Innovations

FUORI LUOGO

**Journal of Sociology of Territory,
Tourism, Technology**

Guest Editors

Norberto Albano
Sandro Brignone
Carmine Urciuoli



Editor in Chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Managing Editor: Carmine Urciuoli

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Italo Calvino and the Invisible Cities: Between Literature and Urban Sociology²

1. Social sciences and rêveries

Urban sociology is a strange discipline, with an apparently clear, simple and well-defined object: the city. A concrete, visible and knowable reality that belongs to everyone's daily experience, including scholars'. Its widespread presence and historicity make it an essential part of the social and cultural imagination. Yet this object loses its consistency as soon as one approaches it and tries to conceptualize, narrate or represent it. In short, a reality that is visible to all but resists any interpretation. Of course, this is a problem for those who study it.

It is therefore understandable that, when faced with a book like *Invisible Cities* by Calvino—which seems to refer to every possible type of city and suggests the existence of a mechanism that can explain cities while representing them—the sociologists might react with curiosity, suspicion and even a hint of envy.

Among the numerous passages in the book that seem to propose an urban theory, one stands out. The Great Khan, for whom Marco Polo is illustrating the cities of his vast empire, tells him: «I have constructed in my mind a model city from which all possible cities can be deduced. It contains everything corresponding to the norm. Since the cities that exist diverge in varying degree from the norm, I need only foresee the exceptions to the norm and calculate the most probable combinations» (*IC*, p. 64)³.

The tone is that of a wise and powerful emperor. But in this crucial passage Calvino explains how he constructed his text, based on a logic that is almost scientific, deducing cases from a model. That sentence, in fact, synthesizes the work of the social scientist, whether an urban sociologist, a historian of the city or, in a more practical way, an architect or a urban planner, figures who often create variations from a model. Marco answers him that he, too, has a model of a city from which he deduces all the others: «a city made only of exceptions, incongruities, contradictions» (*ibidem*). In short, it is a strong interpretative model that, owing to its transformative character, encompasses realities with flawed and elusive elements.

Literature can afford to construct entire worlds without the anxieties of the social scientist, from whom the community expects credible demonstrations, made authoritative by increasingly refined methods. The writer creates worlds—fantastic, plausible, or seemingly so real as to be indistinguishable from our own—for which he is not accountable to anyone. The same happens with science fiction and movies, creating cities and urban systems often based on utopia, dystopia and even social theory, as in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). Instead, the social scientist feels the need to demonstrate what he writes, and in doing so, especially when he is aware of the artificial and debatable nature of literature, he seeks to distance himself from it as much as possible, emphasizing the gap between his work and imagination. Of course, it hasn't always been so, and we know great social scientists who could elegantly play with words and images, just like writers, while also being able to describe and interpret the world.

In urban sociology, references to Calvino and his imaginary cities are frequent, although only few scholars have dared to explicitly mention his book in their writings.

One of them, Guido Martinotti, who also had a great passion for literature (and science fiction), during his lessons liked to refer to Calvino with a mix of admiring deference and sharp criticism. In a collection of lectures published posthumously, he seemed to have *Invisible Cities* in mind

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3 The quotations of *Invisible Cities* (*IC*) are taken from the translation by William Weaver. The page numbers refer to the 2023 digital edition by Vintage Classics.

when he explained the function of his discipline as follows: «Urban social sciences contribute to understanding phenomena that are not directly observable and thus allow us to grasp the characteristics of urban society that are hidden (or not immediately visible, or latent, as one might say)» (Martinotti, 2017, pos. 554).

The study of the city—an elusive and multifaceted reality, as he used to say—essentially moves from the visible to the invisible.⁴ But when the social scientist ventures beyond experiential reality, the gap between sociology and literature paradoxically fades. Certainly, the social scientist attempts to bring this invisible dimension into the realm of science, but in accepting it, he effectively renders all the invisible cities visible. In other words, he gives phenomenal concreteness to an immaterial dimension that easily slips into the realm of imagination and unreality.

Martinotti considered the city as a reality composed of both visible and invisible elements, where «the material and immaterial components of the urban phenomenon become equally important» (*idem*, pos. 322). However, his fear of opening the door too widely to literature led him to distance himself from Calvino: it was better, he said, to use «the somewhat clumsy term ‘non-observable’ instead of the more common ‘invisible,’ as this word had been used in many metaphorical ways» (*idem*, pos. 866). For him, metaphor was a disturbing element that could mislead scientific research. A little later, Martinotti recalls Calvino among those who have made metaphorical use of invisibility. The way in which he refers to him is significant: «the ‘poor Calvino’, whose extraordinary novel, in addition to rightly inspiring the imagination of millions of readers, has unfortunately also unleashed the imagination of conference and event organizers and other mid-cult people, who often speak of it having read only its title» (*ibidem*). The reference to Calvino, to criticize such figures, shows how important *Invisible Cities* was to him.

Martinotti confirms his complex relationship with the writer: «Calvino’s urban *rêveries* are [...] beautiful passages about cities imagined by a true poet, and they give us many extraordinary intellectual emotions». But, as *rêveries*, they can be misleading. Moreover, he continues, «unfortunately, they are poorly borrowed, mostly referring to the title of the story, even to support analytical discussions about cities [...]. The (bad) literarization of the discourse on the city is not limited to novelists or philosophers but is also practiced by social scientists, who should have a different language but, as is easy to discover, when they come to talking about cities, fall into the same common syndrome» (*idem*, pos. 2681).

Calvino, like an enchanting magician, would therefore create urban worlds that not only seem real but might lead (bad) sociologists to apply their interpretive categories to them and use them as metaphors for our own world. However, the invisible reality that the sociologists study must not be confused with the unreality that literature renders visible, despite the title of Calvino’s book. The sociologists should not play with metaphors. The divide between sociology and literature is reaffirmed with an insistence that reveals the difficulty of keeping them separate.

On the other hand, Calvino himself, through Marco Polo, explains that «the city must never be confused with the words that describes it», although he immediately adds that «between the one and the other there is a connection» (*IC*, p. 53).

Calvino’s urban *rêverie* is a parallel world, clearly unreal but so complex and variable as to seem possible. The absurd rules governing it and the fabric of memories and experiences populating it define a series of specificities that give rise to a strange and kaleidoscopic reality.

Calvino chose a narrative structure that harks back to the great travel accounts, which, from Herodotus to Marco Polo, occupy an ambiguous space between report and invention, contributing to the construction of the Western cultural imagination. These accounts have helped shape history, geography and anthropology, suggesting—between Orientalism and cultural relativism—the possibility of hybridizing styles and cultures. Calvino’s characters are not only

4 In urban studies, the theme of invisibility has become increasingly central, as shows the title—clearly inspired by Calvino—of an essay that explores the invisible aspects of the city, including new inequalities, the marginalization of vulnerable populations and digitalization: *La città invisibile. Quello che non vediamo sta cambiando le metropoli*, edited by A. Balducci, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2023.

backed by illustrious progenitors, like the two mentioned above, but also by centuries of literary tradition and scientific culture, spanning from the ancient world to the present day. Calvino's Khan and Marco Polo, therefore, move simultaneously within the historical and literary dimension of the great narratives of the past and within the context of contemporary times. It is in this closeness to the present that the emperor, the traveller and, let us not forget, Calvino himself seem to get close to the urban sociologists.

In their dialogue, the Khan and Marco Polo imagine a generative combinatorial model that, through «exceptions», «incongruities», «contradictions» and «reductions», can create and explain all cities. The city—or, rather, its idea—in this theory and in the stories that develop it, is at once abstract and concrete, always describable in the specific forms it takes from time to time, yet fundamentally unknowable, partly because it is subject to continuous change. In this parallel world, reality and fantasy, likelihood and falsehood are equivalent and coexist. Just as theory and practice seem to coexist: on one side, the reference model and the shape the city takes, and on the other, the set of rules, experiences, anecdotes, perceptions and memories that bring these spaces to life.

2. Dubai and Las Vegas: Invisible Cities

If, for Calvino's Khan and Marco Polo (and therefore for Calvino himself), all cities were «implicit», i.e. inscribed within a model and deducible from it, it could be said that they envisioned even today's cities, including those they could not have known or visited because they came into being or developed after their time.

I certainly don't want to fall into the «bad literarization» of urban analysis, as Martinotti called it. However, I believe that the development of urban civilization, especially in recent decades, has expressed a kaleidoscopic, and at times imaginative, reality that, while explainable through well-known sociocultural models and processes, seems to contain an episodic irrationality bringing it closer to the unreal world of *Invisible Cities*.

The urban space that most clearly, in the current historical and cultural phase, shows a curious closeness to the generative model of Khan and Marco Polo is perhaps Dubai: a real city in every respect, with over 3 million inhabitants and now visited annually by 18 million people. A city with a centuries-old history, but essentially reborn in the 1970s and, within a few decades, transformed into a true *global city*, with a significant role in geopolitical dynamics and an extraordinary economic and cultural appeal.⁵ Dubai has become a fashionable tourist destination and, in a midst of luxury and entertainment, has cemented itself in the collective imagination as a place worth moving to, even to seek good fortune.

Dubai is undoubtedly a city Calvino could not have known. When he wrote his *Invisible Cities*, it didn't yet exist in the form we see today, with its skyline of astonishing skyscrapers, including the Burj Khalifa, 829-metre-high, which since 2010 has stood as the world's tallest building. As in a tale of Calvino's novel, it guarantees Dubai a unique identity and a record-breaking distinction. Among the many symbols of its urban landscape there is the Dubai Frame, inaugurated in 2018 and immediately hailed as one of its "must-see" attractions. This 150-metre-high frame-like structure allows visitors to admire the city from its observatory. But it is something more. It is a monument designed to be a strong architectural element enriching the urban space and reinforcing Dubai's image as a city of excess and hyper-contemporaneity. It is a monument meant to be looked at, photographed and reproduced, but also a device built to direct the gaze toward the city: not only that of tourists, but also that of those who consume it from afar, in promotional brochures or social media. It is a giant frame that celebrates Dubai as a masterpiece. Yet, this operation also marks a dystopia: the inhabited space is transformed into a stage that, in some way, excludes its inhabitants.

5 On the relationships between urban policies and tourism in Dubai, see Melotti (2014).

The city becomes intelligible through the materialization of a theoretical framework that allows us to observe it. The city itself suggests its interpretation. The Dubai Frame is a material element (thus visible) that directs and regulates our gaze, showing us what it deems useful to be seen, while (invisibly) suggesting an interpretation that extols the uniqueness of what we are seeing. We see an image that gives us the illusion of understanding the city, which, however, remains unknowable.

If we pass through the Frame and approach the city, we find a cluster of skyscrapers, iconic buildings, artificial islands, luxury hotels and enormous shopping malls. Among its most intriguing features—not less eccentric than those of Calvino's *Invisible Cities*—is the ski station inside the Mall of the Emirates. Complete with five slopes, a ski lift and a chairlift, it offers snow in a city where temperatures often exceed 40° C. Beyond its recreational and sporting dimensions, the indoor snowfields serve as a dystopian marker aimed at defining an idea of the city and asserting its status as a global city.

This world, in some ways, is anticipated and narrated by Calvino: the city with a thousand variations, where everything is possible, has become reality. A dystopia in every respect, but also a real space where one can move, have fun, consume and live.

One of the most Calvino-like spaces in Dubai is undoubtedly the Ibn Battuta Mall, a shopping centre named after the famous 14th-century traveller (a sort of Arab Marco Polo), which recreates the atmosphere of the countries he visited: Andalusia, Tunisia, Egypt, Persia, India and China. Inside, some architectural elements evoke «the charm of the centuries-old African souks», «the majestic monuments and immense wealth» of Mughal India, «the world of storms, shipwrecks, and pirates» of exploration-era China, «the covered streets of Baghdad», and, of course, the lotus-shaped columns and hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt.⁶ Themed installations complete this immersive experience: a Chinese ship, the Lion Fountain from the Alhambra and a grand mechanical clock, a marvel of Indian engineering. Similarly, another shopping centre, the Dubai Outlet Village, features an interior designed to resemble San Gimignano, with its stone façades and arches. Themed spaces, especially those created for commercial purposes and the culturalization of consumption, are recurring features in the contemporary urban landscape.⁷ In places like these, urban dystopia takes on a historical and geographical dimension: a journey through time and space that could well have been imagined by a poet, writer or storyteller, such as the Marco Polo of *Invisible Cities*. The difference, however, lies in the fact that these are “real” places within highly visible cities.

Among the many contemporary places that exhibit a Calvino-like dystopia is Tianducheng, a Chinese city in Zhejiang Province. This daring urban experiment, initiated in the early 2000s, reflects a concept of city-building (quite different from European traditions), emphasizing artificiality. Tianducheng is a vast urban complex entirely themed after Paris, complete with a scaled-down replica of the Eiffel Tower.⁸ While its outward appearance resembles a Disney-style theme park, Tianducheng is a real city, designed with residential purposes and integrated into broader territorial development and real estate speculation projects.

The city has a profoundly liquid and postmodern character, where the playful and touristic dimensions are indistinguishable from other elements of urban space. Tianducheng is a city, but it is also a dystopian space where identity merges with otherness: a place historically and spatially unconnected with its surroundings, yet deeply embedded in powerful contemporary dynamics, such as globalization and cultural interconnection. Its allure, for both residents and tourists, lies precisely in this otherness, which becomes its defining identity. Tianducheng, as a «variation» and dystopic replica of a real city, could easily fit into Khan's catalogue, where cities can sprout, replicate and resemble one another while remaining fundamentally distinct. Tianducheng is a

6 See <https://www.ibnbattutamall.com/en>.

7 On theming, see Bryman (1999, pp. 29-33).

8 For the use of theming in China, see Bosker (2013) and Melotti (2018), and, for Tianducheng's Paris, the beautiful photographic volume by Prost (2020).

new city, which, in a different space and time, reproduces a city with centuries of history—similar yet different, and unquestionably real.

Among places that help us understand contemporary dynamics and capture the interest of philosophers, urban planners, architects and sociologists, we must not forget Las Vegas. It is perhaps one of the few “fantastic” contemporary urban spaces that Calvino might have been aware of. With its themed hotels, casinos and restaurants, Las Vegas is a special urban space, which pioneered a new type of city, devoted, at least initially, to gambling, sex and entertainment. It is a city built for a transient population: gamblers, tourists, newlyweds and convention attendees. Its residential function, though significant, is conceptually residual: workers who keep the hotels and casinos running live in a sort of parallel ghost city. Time and space in Las Vegas are molded to delight its consumers, with architecture inspired by ancient Rome, Pharaonic Egypt and Venice.⁹ For these peculiarities, Las Vegas could easily belong to Calvino’s invisible cities.

In some respects, Dubai can be considered a new Las Vegas and, in a consumer-driven society always in search of novelty, has actually surpassed it. However, in 2023, Las Vegas inaugurated an attraction, the Sphere, which, thanks to its strong iconic power, has entailed its return to the global imagination. It is an enormous sphere, over three hundred metres tall, entirely covered in LEDs, capable of creating a potentially infinite number of images. Among those that have most caught attention, there is the large eyeball, which seems to gaze at those who look at it. Las Vegas is the city of gambling and entertainment par excellence, but, in a changing sociocultural context, this gives way to unsettling elements. The great eye of Las Vegas is designed to be consumed by the tourist gaze, but it presents itself as a space dominated by something that looks, observes, controls and even judges. The Sphere is an element that characterizes the urban reality and in some way regenerates it. Owing to its uniqueness, it would not look out of place in one of Calvino’s invisible cities, whose communities seem to be at the mercy of the elements they helped create, but which escape their control and make them prisoners.

In our world, in fact, many variants can coexist and, above all, reality and artifice often end up hybridizing, accompanying the “liquidity” between past and present and between living, productive, consumptive and recreational dimensions, heightened in the postmodern context that was forming when Calvino was writing his *Invisible Cities*. At that moment, Calvino was probably observing the ongoing change with a critical eye, though not yet clearly defined.¹⁰

The Caesars Palace, the large Roman-themed casino hotel in Las Vegas (a precursor to postmodern theming and one of the symbols of postmodernity), was inaugurated in 1966, just six years before the publication of *Invisible Cities*. Urban planners and architects began reflecting on the new urban realities that, like Las Vegas, were then emerging. Robert Venturi’s famous essay on Las Vegas (1972) was published in the same year as *Invisible Cities*. The work of his group on this city proposed an interpretation of the meaning of spaces that (as he himself explained when accepting the Pritzker Prize) show the vitality of urban sprawl and allow us to recognize the importance of mass culture for architecture, the «genius of the everyday» and the significance of the commercial dimension of our culture (Venturi, 1991). In those same years, Umberto Eco (1976) discovered Disneyland, «a world of fantasy more real than the real world», and published an essay on hyperreality, which would have a remarkable influence, not only in Italy.

3. Between narrative and reality: urban theories and (in)visible cities

If Disneyland, Las Vegas and Dubai express, in some respects, the hyperreality conceived by Umberto Eco (1976) and analysed by Jean Baudrillard (1981), the Calvino’s cities—although hyperreal and vaguely inspired by reality, of which they can be considered fantastic variants—live only

9 On the postmodern character of Las Vegas resorts, see Melotti (2011).

10 For the relationship between Calvino and postmodern culture, with particular reference to *Invisible Cities*, see M. Meschini (2018), who states that Calvino “perfectly thematizes the postmodern principle of cognitive uncertainty” (p. 48).

in the non-real dimension of the narrative. This is the invisibility the author refers to, playing on the power of literature, which can make even the non-existent visible. However, when Calvino imagines a city, he acts as an architect or an urban planner, and when he analyzes it, he acts as a sociologist. Of course, urban sociology works with the real world, even when studying its invisible aspects. However, even the sociologists imagine cities, when, in order to interpret them, they build models.

The affinities are even closer. Calvino's city, despite its fantastic forms, fundamentally responds to the European tradition.¹¹ The reflection on the city is truly vast and dates back quite a long time, especially if, stepping outside modern thought, we include works such as Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Politics*, which in the real or imagined *poleis* identify a key element of the social and "political" life. The city is a social fact and a human creation tied to specific contexts and needs. Alongside this aspect, however, there is an ideal one, which transcends the forms it takes at any time.

Even in urban planning and sociology studies, despite the differences in individual and cultural orientations, the idea remains that the city is a "thing", to quote Durkheim: a describable phenomenon, which, despite its complexity and myriads of variations, refers to an abstract idea of the city, modelable and subject to rules and exceptions. This can be seen in important studies from the decade preceding the publication of *Invisible Cities* and, as evidence of a period of intense reflection on the phenomenon, in the immediately subsequent years. Notably, *The City in History* by Lewis Mumford (1961), *The Idea of the City* by Joseph Rykwert (1963) and *History of the City* by Leonardo Benevolo (1975) show how scientific reflection on the city is based on the assumption of its thinkability as an "idea". In this regard, the title of the book by Rykwert, whom Calvino personally knew, is particularly significant. The city is thinkable in itself, because, regardless of its form, it has a symbolic structure that can be traced and decoded.

Similarly, the monumental contributions of Mumford and Benevolo imply an abstract idea of the city, which takes concrete form, with historical, geographical, social and cultural variants: the ancient, medieval, modern city; the European, Asian, American city, etc. I remark that the final paragraph of Mumford's book (ch. 17, par. 11) was just entitled "The invisible city".

In the same perspective, we can read the sophisticated cities imagined by recent sociology: the smart city, the green city, the blue-green city, the hospitable city, the inclusive city, the sustainable city, etc.¹² Calvino did not necessarily make use of the theoretical models conceived by utopian thinkers, urban planners and sociologists, which he partly was acquainted with, but, as a good European, he was formed in a context with a tradition of reflection on the city. This was the basis on which he created his fantastic cities as variants of real cities and, at the same time, possible cities, deducible from an abstract and pervasive idea of the city.

In this curious correspondence between fantastical elaboration and scientific thought, we can recall some urban theories that appeared after the publication of his book or even after his death. On the one hand, these theories provide tools for interpreting the worlds he imagined and, on the other, describe realities that would not be out of place in his work. If read as one of his stories, these descriptions, while depicting real cities, give life to a deeply dystopian world of possible cities.

Alan Bryman (1995, 1999) recognized in Disney parks a system that influences society as a whole, and John Hannigan (1998) showed how Disneyfication has particularly impacted urban culture, where a fantasy city based on consumption and entertainment has emerged. These analyses

11 According to Barengi (2002), the origin of *Invisible Cities* is closely intertwined with the studies of Charles Fourier, a prominent figure in early 19th-century utopian socialism. Furthermore, as show the four pages from Calvino's archive studied by Barengi, «evocative urban images are directly drawn from the writings of other authors», including John Ruskin, Victor Considérant, Étienne Cabet, Friedrich Engels and Joseph Rykwert, as featured in F. Choay's anthology (1965). For further insights into the sources of *Invisible Cities*, see Belpoliti (2005).

12 On the *smart city*, see the special issue of *Fuori Luogo*, edited by M. Bernardi and L. Bottini (2023). For an intriguing critique of the *smart city* as an expression of the «temporality of financial capitalism», see Beauregard (2015). On the *blue-green city*, see Bernardi and Marra (2024).

concern real processes related to tangible cities, such as Las Vegas or Dubai. At the same time, they propose models that seem to create new types of cities, which can be added to the “normal” ones, as their variants. The fantasy city, in short, could be Dubai, but it could also be one of the invisible cities of Calvino or one of those implicitly present in the generative structure of his text. In the same way, we can also interpret the famous (and debated) theory of “non-places” (*non lieux*) by Marc Augé (1992).¹³ Cities, which we are accustomed to thinking of as a collection of places, also contain non-places. Augé referred to those spaces (shopping malls, supermarkets, service stations, airports, etc.) that are present almost identically everywhere, with functions that tend to erase identity and specificity. Non-places, unlike traditional places such as squares, markets or cathedrals, are also incapable of generating identity in those who frequent them. Clearly, Augé aimed at highlighting and deploring the cultural and existential homogenization produced by globalization.

Augé’s theory, also due to the striking expression that summarizes it, quickly became popular: the non-place is now a category evoked, often inappropriately, to describe some unsettling, dystopian or incomprehensible aspects of our cities. Non-places have thus become narrative elements capable of creating parallel cities, dotted with black holes that swallow their users.

The back cover of the French edition of his book is, in this sense, a small masterpiece, comparable to Calvino’s descriptions of invisible cities—places characterized by strange architectural elements, unusual events and odd behaviour: «Le *non-lieu* est donc tout le contraire d’une demeure, d’une résidence, d’un lieu au sens commun du terme. Seul, mais semblable aux autres, l’utilisateur du *non-lieu* entretient avec celui-ci une relation contractuelle symbolisée par le billet de train ou d’avion, la carte présentée au péage ou même au chariot poussé dans les travées d’une grande surface. Dans ces *non-lieux*, on ne conquiert son anonymat qu’en fournissant la preuve de son identité, passeport, carte de crédit, chèque ou tout autre permis qui en autorise l’accès».

It is clear, however, that these places most fully express the nature of the postmodern condition. Not only do they have their own identity, as signs of the integration of urban space into a given sociocultural system, but they are also powerful means of assigning identity, as they affirm the inclusion of their users into the society of flows and consumption and create new spaces of socialization. Thus, the same *non-places* can be interpreted as *hyper-places* or *super-places*: new categories that both enrich and fragment urban space.¹⁴

Theories, in other words, are “narratives” which, as such, can coexist. The world of urban studies is a great book, where, like in *Invisible Cities*, different worlds come to life and coexist. However, unlike in Calvino’s work, where differences prevail and new cities constantly appear, in the book of studies the urban space can be the same, even though it appears differently depending on the theory used.

The same applies, of course, to more recent theories, such as *the fifteen-minute city* by Carlos Moreno and the then-mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo, which envisioned a city where people can reach everything they need—work, school, stores, cinema, gym, etc.— within fifteen minutes (Moreno, 2024). In this city, one can walk or bike to work, perhaps in co-working spaces, or even work from home thanks to smart-working. Daily life seems like a fairy tale, and its description could fit among those of “invisible cities”. The narrative form of the theoretical discourse, after all, brings it closer to a literary *rêverie*. This city, designed to reorganize the urban life more functionally, can also be considered a desirable model for the future city. Yet, in our cities, it is often already possible to access most services within a quarter of an hour, as in that utopian city. The fifteen-minute city thus does not exist and exists: it can be realized with specific interventions, but it can also be present without them.¹⁵

13 According to Martinotti (2007, pos. 2782), Augé is a fortunate «commodifier of words», who allegedly drew from a text by M.M. Webber (1964), without citing it. His urban anthropology, lacking scientific rigor, falls within the realm of *rêverie*—the term he also used for Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*.

14 For *hyper-lieux*, see Lussault (2017), and for a reflection on those categories, Castigliano (2021).

15 For a critique of Moreno’s model, see Balbo (2020).

In a similar way, we can consider the idea of the *global city*, developed by Saskia Sassen (1991), which exerted a considerable influence on social studies. The global city can be seen as a Calvinian city, because its processes are largely "invisible", reflecting the flows and mechanisms of post-industrial society. Its «cross-border dynamics», «strategic transnational networks» and «spatial organization of finance» refer to a real and unreal world that would not be out of place in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. Consider one of the characteristics that define global cities: although they are distant and represent different histories, cultures and traditions, they resemble each other much more than they resemble their nearby cities. The scientific observation takes on almost fairy-tale contours, generating a type of city with the magical virtue of resembling each other and not resembling any others.

4. Calvino's City without Utopia: Between History and Mythopoiesis

Calvino's city remains an elusive space: its kaleidoscopic nature eventually builds an extremely dynamic and complex urban system. In the fable-like dimension of the story, the city almost seems to self-generate: «the catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born» (*IC*, p. 126). It is, in short, a world made of forms in perpetual transformation, but also in constant search of balance. In this urban universe, humans seem like an alien element, subject to the form of the city, generated by the unfolding of possibilities. They do not seem to be their creators but their victim. This is a surprising stance for an author who was well-versed in both the European classical tradition and the scientific debate about the city and its history. Moreover, the form seems to prevail over substance, including social structure, determining the relationships, experiences, dreams and frustrations of the inhabitants.

Pier Paolo Pasolini (1999) recognized the cultural and political implications of this conception: Calvino's urban universe is deeply idealistic and Platonic in its constant (though dynamic) dichotomy between reality and the world of ideas and seems to leave little space for Marxism, which «the book, while encompassing, denies (but does not abjure)». Pasolini also points out that in Calvino there is little room for the idea of a Better City: perfection, if ever, can only be achieved outside of history.

In a famous lecture in New York, Calvino (1983, p. 40) defined his work as a «last love poem for the city». But this love is truly strange: Calvino's city does not conceal its harshness and does not seem like a place for living. Joy, happiness and love mostly appear in the form of memory or desire, in a deeply experiential perspective, often in a time placed elsewhere.

However, the kaleidoscopic nature of his urban universe should not lead one to think that he lacks a clearly defined idea of the city. On the contrary, it is precisely its possible infinite variations that shape a powerful and almost all-encompassing idea of it. This can be due partly to Calvino's cultural background and his readings and partly to his life, which led him to quite different cities in terms of size, structure and culture, such as Sanremo, Turin, Rome, Paris and New York.¹⁶ In the aforementioned lecture (pp. 37-38), Calvino confirmed the importance of this experiential element in the construction of his work: «everything ended up being transformed into images of cities», including the garbage that is thrown into the streets every day.¹⁷

The setting of the story in the time of Marco Polo is obviously metaphorical, because he tells of timeless cities, placeable in any era, including our own. As the story progresses, the contemporary dimension becomes increasingly evident, to be explicitly revealed in the series of «continuous cities»: timeless, certainly, but immersed in processes of growth and distortion responding to phenomena characteristic of the context in which Calvino lived.

¹⁶ On the relationship between Calvino and the cities he encountered, see Barengi (2023).

¹⁷ In *Invisible Cities*, trash is the element upon which the identity of the city of Leonia is constructed, as «you can measure Leonia's opulence, but rather by the things that each day are thrown out to make room for the new» (*IC*, p. 102).

In the final part of the work, the kaleidoscopic effect becomes even more intense: the literary dimension seems to recede in the face of history, which becomes an indispensable element. Reality and fantasy intertwine, now hybridizing, now remaining clearly distinct, in a flow in and out of history. Marco Polo imagines and describes invisible cities unknown to the Khan. However, the latter possesses an «atlas» that shapes the urban universe, placing it on a map that encompasses everything. This universe is therefore knowable: it can not only be narrated, as Marco does, but also placed on a map. This is a significant shift, which, from Anaximander onward, marks the possibility of deciphering the world and analysing it scientifically.

That atlas «preserves the differences intact» (*IC*, p. 125), maintaining the distinctions that define identities in a world of constantly changing forms. This clarification highlights an important conceptual issue regarding the complex relationship between theory and practice, as well as between fantasy and reality: the map describes with precision a world that is simultaneously fantastical (because it belongs to a literary creation) and real (because it exists within the reality of that fiction and takes shape through tools of scientific thought). On the other hand, Marco Polo himself (the interlocutor of the Khan) was a “real” traveller, who visited “real” cities and lived in them, becoming a mythical figure of an explorer and adventurer, and a valuable source for the study of past peoples and cultures. He is, in fact, remembered as the author of an important diary (*The Travels of Marco Polo*, in Italian *Il Milione*), which he did not write himself, having “told” it to those who wrote it, probably with additions and embellishments. It is this dual nature of Marco Polo, between history and mythopoiesis, that Calvino captures and amplifies, making him the narrator of *Invisible Cities*.

The Khan’s atlas, which contains everything, also expresses this duality. In the final section of the text, through this atlas, other cities are described—cities different from those recalled by Marco Polo, since they relate to the extra-literary reality, which brings the story back into the dimension of myth and history. Thus, cities from mythical, philosophical and utopian thought are evoked (such as New Atlantis, Utopia and the City of the Sun), along with great historical cities (such as Ur, Jerusalem and Granada), sometimes transfigured by myth, literature and collective imagination (like Troy, Samarkand and Constantinople), together with modern realities, such as San Francisco, Amsterdam, New York and Osaka (*IC*, p. 147; pp. 124-126). It is precisely in these references to stunning contemporary urban realities that mythopoiesis reappears: San Francisco seems to arise from a union of Troy and Constantinople, while Amsterdam and York are almost magically connected with New Amsterdam and New York. The play of forms that gives rise to the cities somehow make them real, passing from literary fiction to history and geography.

The method of the Khan and Marco Polo for understanding and generating cities proves to be a powerful hermeneutic tool: it suggests the existence of a model from which all cities can be deduced, using exceptions and combinations. Inconsistencies and contradictions, as Marco emphasizes, do not undermine the model but, on the contrary, are constitutive elements, forming the solid liquidity (or, if you prefer, the liquid solidity) of the urban world.

Calvino, in his lecture, explained that «the idea of the city» conveyed in his narrative «is not outside time» and that, above all, in his book one can find, both implicitly and explicitly, «a discussion on the city in general» (1983, p. 40). *Invisible Cities* remains within a fable-like and literary dimension, but, with that statement, the author asserts an intent that brings him closer to the world of urban theories (which are themselves narratives, if not a specific form of narrative). Furthermore, within the work, he proposes an interpretive model of deductive nature that presupposes an idea of the city.

In that lecture, Calvino also questioned the meaning of the city and proposed a (much-quoted) reading key for his book: «What is the city today, for us? I believe that I have written something like a last love poem addressed to the city». The city is a plural phenomenon that concerns «us», but its interpretation can only be subjective. *Invisible Cities* is thus a celebration of urban civilization, personal like every declaration of love. The idea of the city, from theory, returns to the intimate and individual fact of experience.

5. Urban Crisis between Unhappiness and the Loss of Boundaries

In the same lecture, Calvino asserts that his reflection on cities takes place «at a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to live there» and adds that «it looks, indeed, as if we are approaching a period of crisis in urban life». The “crisis of the city”, together with the “flight from the city”, is a recurring theme in cultural imagination and public debate. Calvino himself is aware of this, and towards the conclusion of *Invisible Cities*, one of his characters says that «until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born» (*IC*, p. 126). The city cannot die.

Calvino’s doubts probably stemmed from the condition of decay and conflict (of also social kind) in the capitalist cities, like the working-class Turin, which he knew very well and depicted in some of his writings.¹⁸ The post-industrial city was just beginning to make a timid appearance, and Calvino, like others, anticipated a criticism of it. However, a postmodern city, conceived as a reality to flee from, did not yet exist. His criticism was focused on a specific aspect of the city: its continuous growth, erasing identity and differences, which, in *Invisible Cities*, form the identifying features of urban civilization. In this regard, he explicitly stated: «The image of ‘megalopolis’—the ending, undifferentiated city, which is steadily covering the surface of the earth—dominates my book, too» (Calvino, 1983, p. 41). The existential and experiential dimension remains at the forefront: «*Invisible Cities* is like a dream born out of the heart of the unlivable cities we know» (*idem*, p. 40).

This unlivability is associated by him with the environmental degradation and alienation caused by growth: an attention that reflects a significant aspect of the 1970s counterculture. This makes his position highly modern, anticipating the recent environmentalism, which has reintroduced themes such as the crisis of urban development models and the flight from the city.

The pages in which some elements of the contemporary cities appear together with a critique of their development model are those dedicated to the «continuous cities».

Procopia is the city that grows by devouring the nature around it and creates an osmotic and suffocating urban landscape made up of increasingly numerous «faces», replacing ditches, trees, thickets and even the sky (*IC*, p. 131-132). This urban sprawl swallows rural areas, but also turns the city into slums, overcrowded in a disorderly manner. Growth is a process of destruction and alienation, in which there are no people, but only faces piled up on top of each other.

Cecilia, on the other hand, is the space that interrupts pastures. It is also alienating and destructive, and to the shepherd who speaks of it, it appears so senseless that, in his opinion, it does not even deserve a name: «Cities have no name for me: they are places without leaves, separating one pasture from another» (*IC*, p. 137). For those who do not participate in urban life, the city makes no sense. As for Marco Polo, he recognizes only cities and cannot identify the meaning of uninhabited places, where everything blends together. In other words, there emerges a conflict between populations, perspectives and lifestyles. However, there is no relativism: even those who live in a city, like Marco, can lose themselves in it, failing to distinguish anything in places that seem all the same. The great traveller also confesses not knowing when and how he ended up in that city. «The places have mingled» (*IC*, p. 138), the shepherd wisely notes. Cecilia is a metaphor for the boundless, globalized city, identical to all the others of the same type, but it is also a denunciation of the senselessness of an urban condition erasing all differences.

Penthesilea presents this process in an even more paroxysmal way. As one moves through it, there is no way of understanding whether one is in its centre or in its outskirts. Centre and periphery lose their meaning, to the point of raising the doubt that it is «only the outskirts of itself» and that it «has its centre everywhere» (*IC*, p. 146). In the literary transfiguration as in reality, the city continues to subvert the spatial organization, concentric and hierarchical, of Western culture.

Trude, a prototype of postmodern seriality and standardization, seems an anticipation of Augé’s non-places: it is the city made of places identical to those of many others, and thus similar to

¹⁸ See, for example, the story *La nuvola di smog* (1958), the “cloud of smog”, set in a city identifiable as Turin, where pollution becomes a metaphor for the psychological and existential difficulties of urban life.

them «detail by detail». In Calvino's reading of urban space, based on experience, Trude is an entity that, owing to indistinguishability of its places, creates disorientation: the airport where you arrive seems like the one you have departed from, and the hotel where you check in for the first time makes you feel as though you had already been there (*IC*, p. 116). It is, in short, the homogenized, standardized and serialized world of Sheratons and McDonald's, described a few years later by urban sociologists.

The Calvino city is a space that tends to be unhappy. In the previously cited lecture, Calvino states that his book includes both happy and unhappy cities, opening and closing with happy ones. However, the happiness of the first, Diomira, is based on the sense of envy it evokes in the traveller. The happiness of the last, Berenice, is even more doubtful: there is an «unjust» Berenice, which has a hidden twin sister, the «city of the just», but even in this «a malignant seed is hidden» (*IC*, pp. 145-146). It is an image marked by disenchanting realism, revealing everything but happiness. Even the reference to the «future Berenice», which recalls the utopian element in the work, does not hint at a bright future. Its presentation concludes with a truly interesting reflection that seems to suggest a Vichian recurrence of history: «the real Berenice is a temporal succession of different cities, alternately just and unjust». However, there is never a synthesis (Hegelian or Marxian) to crown a path of growth and improvement. Injustice is inevitable, and in this urban universe where form prevails over structure, justice, the only element governed by humans, seems destined to fail. The slight utopian element is immediately erased: «all the future Berenices are already present in this instant» (*ibidem*). In short, the Gramscian "future city" does not exist, not even in a tale.

6. Memory and Postcards: Identity and Crystallization

In the aforementioned New York conference, Calvino also provided a striking definition of the city and urban culture: «A city is a combination of many things: memory, desires, signs of a language; it is a place of exchange, as any textbook of economic history will tell you – only, these exchanges are not just trade in goods, they also involve words, desires, and memories» (1983, p. 41). Here, the kaleidoscopic nature of Calvino's urban system from plurality becomes complexity. The urban space is a dense place, where, beyond formal elements, difference depends on experiences and emotions.

Thus, the city is conceived as an extremely dynamic and highly subjective system, where the individual perspective alters its meaning. The anthropocentric totalism replaces the an-anthropocentric formalism, which, in its fragmentation, proposes an arduous and unsatisfactory idea of urban life. Calvino, in illustrating the structure of *Invisible Cities*, highlights the importance of two elements, «memory» and «desire», which also serve as interpretative categories that allow for the deep understanding of many cities. However, these are ambiguous and elusive categories, because of their experiential and individual dimension: memory takes the form of regret, nostalgia and the search for a past—lived or not lived—that cannot be repeated or changed, while desire is a feeling that swallows the future without ever possessing it.

Memory can become a destructive tool, as happens in the city of Zora, «forced to remain motionless and always the same in order to be more easily remembered» (*IC*, p. 13). But, staying motionless, it languishes and disappears until it is forgotten. The city is a dynamic reality that cannot crystallize. This is almost a self-evident observation, which adheres to a strongly realistic and organicistic view of the city. However, it also contains a critique of those («the world's most learned men») who study and interpret urban space only to crystallize it into formulas and theories. It is not surprising, therefore, that an urban sociologist like Martinotti felt the need to distance himself from Calvino, emphasizing the dreamlike dimension of *Invisible Cities*.

However, Calvino's observation can be used to explain the identity death of those cities that, in order to be better remembered, in response to the *tourist gaze* crystallize and transform into theme parks or places entirely similar to others, losing their specificity and ending up forgotten. I don't think Calvino was thinking about tourism, but Zora seems to be the prototype of a village that transforms into a museum with «the quality of remaining in your memory point by point», perhaps with a list of famous men who lived there, famous works exhibited or important events that occurred there, but, without change, exits from time and nullifies itself. However, reality is increasingly complex: tourism, even when it crystallizes certain aspects (e.g., "ancient" inns, "typical" products, "traditional" festivals, etc.), transforms the territory (e.g., homes becoming B&Bs, shops turning into souvenir stores, etc.). Zora, in short, would not die from not being changed, but from being changed too much, in a self-consuming process where change leads to crystallization.

In Maurilia, the relationship with tourism is explicit: «the traveller is invited to visit the city» (*IC*, p. 26). Its tourist dimension seems intrinsic. The city, however, can only be understood through the «postcards» of its past, and the local community invites visitors to observe it through «old postcards that show it as it used to be». The present seems to disappear. This is a very particular form of tourist self-crystallization, different from that seen in medieval villages and art cities. The past is not recreated and staged with forms of *staged authenticity*; it is the present that folds upon the past: the traveller «must praise the postcard city and prefer it to the present one». The community has renounced its present (and therefore its future) and offers only an image of its past, even though it is conveyed by postcards and not by reconstructions or stagings. This is a process that, even in this form, fits into the mechanisms of the *tourist gaze*, which leads the community to offer visitors an image of itself (in Italy usually tied to the past) that is deemed to meet their expectations.¹⁹

The process can also be read from the perspective of the traveller. On the one hand, they find themselves in the present-day Maurilia, observing and exploring it, but they are invited to read it only through its past, which prevents them from establishing an authentic and deep relationship with its community. On the other hand, they carry out a standardized operation, consuming the tourist space by consuming its images. Maurilia, the postcard city, seems to be a metaphor for contemporary tourism.

However, Calvino, more than focusing on tourism (which, when he wrote *Invisible Cities*, was in a very different phase from the present), was thinking of another phenomenon: the transition, which occurred in many places, from provincial cities to metropolises. He interpreted this not as a historical fact but as an experiential one: the citizens struggle to recognize themselves in the city around them and long for the city of the past, transfigured by nostalgia, which they probably would not have appreciated in its reality. Calvino here, as in other passages, invites reflection on the difficulty of understanding the present, a result of rapid and uncontrolled growth.

The Subjective City Between History and Memory

Calvino devotes considerable space to the city's immaterial and subjective aspect, where memory expands and completes the experiential element: the city is lived and reshaped by recollection. The remembered city is no less real than the actual one, but it is different. In the imaginative dimension of the narrative, however, memory can also be a dream and can merge with it. This happens in Isidora, where the traveller, now at an advanced age, visits the city he dreamed of when he was young, finds «the wall where the old men sit and watch the young go by», sits among them and realizes that everything has passed. The city seems to devour those who live in it: it gives the illusion of fulfilling dreams, but in reality, it consumes lives in an endless waiting: «Desires are already memories» (*IC*, p. 7).

In Zaira, the reflection on the importance of the immaterial dimension is even more explicit: the description and quantification of the material elements that make up a city are meaningless

¹⁹ For the *Staged authenticity*, see MacCannell (1973); for the *tourist gaze*, see Urry (1990) and Urry and Larsen (2011).

because «the city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past» (*IC*, p. 9). The city is a system of relationships (as many sociologists would agree), but in this case, these do not coincide with the “non-observable” aspects that Martinotti referred to. In Zaira, it is the event-related dimension, made of occurrences and experiences that turn into memories, that shapes the space and gives meaning to places. The city, with another not-so-positive image, is presented as a «sponge» that absorbs memories. The relationship with the past holds special importance in a cultural system strongly rooted in historicism, like ours and even more so that in which Calvino was trained. But this relationship is always problematic: «The city does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand» (*ibidem*); a past «written» in the myriad of material elements (corners, handrails, flagpoles, antennas, etc.) that forms its space, but only make sense in relation to the events connected to them (experiences, memories, etc.). In Calvino’s city, the architectural and monumental components seem secondary: history is based on the stories, even those made up of trivialities and neglected memories.

Calvino seems not to believe in History with a capital H, as a structuring element of cultural thought. This lack of solidity, although an outcome of the literary fiction and the constructive mechanism of the work, paves the way for a liquidity that is already postmodern. The world of *Invisible Cities* is fragmented and difficult. The past changes as the journey progresses, and every decision modifies it (*IC*, p. 24). This statement, obvious even if uttered in a wise tone, allows for a complete deconstruction of our relationship with time and space. Every choice precludes others, and the world, instead of expanding, seems to shrink around the individuals, suffocating them in urban spaces that, at every place and at every moment, show what could have been and was not. Calvino’s postmodernity (or at least that of his Marco Polo) is not joyful. On the other hand, the individual seems to acquire great power. His “gaze” constructs space: «elsewhere is a negative mirror», which, through the gaze, allows one to recognize «the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have» (*IC*, p. 25). This concept can be identified as an anticipation of the *tourist gaze*: an active gaze, capable of transforming space, causing the local community to conform to the stereotypes that shape it.

In Calvino, the gaze ends up influencing the city and thus also its history, understood as the visible result of a diachronic process. The past, tied to the individuals and their gaze, prevents a monumental view of urban space, which is deprived of history and, to use a term not present in *Invisible Cities*, cultural heritage.

7. Hermeneutics and Urban Fragmentation

An interesting aspect of Calvino’s work is his ability to deconstruct the city in a game that reveals its fragilities. In this universe based on «form», the city can grow exponentially and find itself split and reflected, or, as happens in Armilla, it can lose those material and architectural elements (walls, ceilings, floors) that, in European urban thought, distinguish the city as a collection of dwellings. Armilla «has nothing that makes it seem a city, except the water pipes that rise vertically where the houses should be and spread out horizontally where the floors should be» (*IC*, p. 42). However, it is not a cold, metallic city from a science-fiction future: the pipes resemble a «forest» with sinks and bathtubs standing out like «late fruits still hanging from boughs» and with young women «luxuriating in the bathtubs» suspended in the void. Thus, Armilla is a dreamlike city, almost Fellinian in its exuberance of joyful female nudity. The fragile verticality and lightness of its structure seem to give narrative form to the sculptures of Fausto Melotti, which Calvino knew and admired.²⁰ The charm of Armilla lies in this sculptural and po-

²⁰ Calvino himself acknowledged the influence of Fausto Melotti on his vision of the city: «There was a time when, after meeting the sculptor Fausto Melotti [...] I was inspired to write about cities as thin as his sculptures: cities on stilts, cities like spider webs» (Sfogliando l’atlante [interview], *L’Espresso*, 18, 45, November 5, 1972, p. 11). The intellectual

etic essence, which intertwines the material and the immaterial: the city, stripped of its external elements, lets emerge those invisible, which constitute its real structure and determine its shape. Armilla is a diagram of flows, which allows one to see and conceptualize structural elements and systems of relationships that are usually not visible. In this perspective, Armilla is pure urban theory: it gives shape to that society of flows and networks, both material and immaterial, visible and invisible, which is one of the endpoints of the current analysis of the urban space. However, the deconstruction goes further: on the one hand, it brings the city back to its zero degree as a system of infrastructure; on the other, as if to reaffirm the symbolic essence of urban life, it dissolves the mechanical brutality of the infrastructural level in a timeless mythical lightness. The city, we discover, is in fact populated by nymphs, who, after ascending subterranean veins that seem to come from a pre-urban past, enter the piping system, which are for them a «new aquatic realm». The city, despite of its most mechanical and anti-poetic aspect of a set of pipes, succumbs to the atemporal beauty of myth. Thus, the history of the city becomes evanescent and confused, transforming into mythopoetic memory: the invasion of the nymphs «may» have driven out the human beings; Armilla «may» have been built by humans as a «votive offering», to make amends for having contaminated the waters with a brutal development. A powerful yet unsettling image, which sets up a post-apocalyptic scenario. These nymphs, bathing in the city abandoned by its builders, seem to have erased humanity and regained control of an ecosystem altered by men. But Calvino, adopting the fluidity of mythical thinking, also proposes another scenario: the city is a gift from men to the nymphs, which re-consecrates the territory. One can, in fact, find a balance between nature and culture, and it is possible to rediscover the “soul of places”, even though, sadly, this implies a withdrawal of human beings and their abandonment of the city.

In Marco Polo's narrative, the fragmentation of urban space becomes a cognitive tool: deconstruction allows for the focus on minimal and seemingly insignificant elements, from which experiential micro-narratives emerge. The city of Zaira is the emblem of this hermeneutic path: the city, the narrator recalls, is made of «relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past» (*IC*, p. 9). Architectural elements become significant if interpreted in a relational logic, transforming space into narrative, memory and experience, linking it to the community that inhabits it (as, for example, the gutter on which a cat walks, destroyed by a cannon shot, as recall the old men who mend the fishing nets at the dock). Street corners, window grilles, staircase handrails, flagpoles and lightning rods become structural elements, rich in experiential meaning, giving sense to form.

It is not only the city that fragments, but the gaze itself that breaks and multiplies, altering our idea of the city. In *Zemrude*, those who look upward see window sills and curtains; those who look downward see gutters, manholes, fish scales and waste paper. However one aspect is not truer than the other (*IC*, p. 58). The fragmented city seems incomprehensible, but it actually gains meaning precisely from the plurality and complexity of this fragmented gaze, which surpasses the idealistic and aulic character of the pre-postmodern city-*polis*, the highest expression of civilization. A new urban gaze in which one can glimpse a literary and fairy-tale form of micro-history.²¹

Calvino's deconstruction of the city can be related at least in part to a postmodern gaze, but, even more, to an awareness, even of political nature, of the transformation of the social and economic context. The theme, therefore, is not the much-feared death of the city, but the implosion of an urban model that, as Calvino wrote elsewhere, exposes its «disintegrated or cancerous

relationship between Calvino and the sculptor has been extensively explored in essays (see, among others, L. Modena, 2004) and exhibitions (such as *Fausto Melotti. In leggerezza. Un omaggio a Italo Calvino*, Santa Maria della Scala, Siena, December 7, 2023 - April 7, 2024).

21 The micro-history was taking shape in those years precisely within a context linked to the Einaudi publishing house, which, from 1981 to 1991, would entrust Giovanni Levi and Carlo Ginzburg with the direction of a specific collection, “Microstorie”.

parts». On the other hand, exposing the unpleasant elements of this fragmentation, can be the starting point for working out the «city of tomorrow» (1975, p. 349). With all due respect to Pasolini, an element of utopia, a legacy of a progressive cultural and political formation, in Calvino exists, even though in him form prevails over structure. The expression he uses, «the material from which the city of tomorrow will take shape», does not necessarily imply a social or political action (though it does not exclude it) and seems to leave the future of the city to an ananthropic process of recombinations of forms from which «new cities will continue to be born» (*IC*, p. 126). Calvino's gaze on the city is neither naive nor uninformed. The fairy-tale dimension of *Invisible Cities* should not make us forget other reflections, rooted in reality and attentive to social complexity. Beyond a good knowledge of urban studies, his daily experience as an urban intellectual (and perhaps as a *flâneur*) gave him a clear idea of the processes underway, which he expressed with sociological lucidity: It is with new eyes that we today look at the city and before our eyes appears a different city, of which social composition, population density per square metre of built space, dialects, public and family morals, entertainments, market stratifications, ways of inventing solutions to service deficiencies, of dying or surviving in hospitals, of learning in schools or on the street, are elements that compose an intricate and fluid map, difficult to reduce to the essentiality of a scheme» (1975, p. 349). Calvino thus raises the issue of interpreting contemporary urban civilization and realizes the need to identify an interpretive scheme, even if he perceives its impossibility, if not its futility. And here the path of the literary figure diverges from that of the sociologist.

Among the sociologists who have used *Invisible Cities* to build a reflection both on urban theories and dynamics we have to recall Paolo Perulli. His book *Visioni di città* (2009) begins «right where Calvino's atlas of invisible cities ends» (p. 3). According to him, cities are mainly forms, and the Calvinian approach to urban civilization, based on a caleidoscopic generative system, is able to catch the deep nature of the urban experience. In this view, centuries of urban theories, urban planning and urban realities constitute a kind of Calvinian variation that accompanies social history. Calvino is something "good to think with": the history of urban civilization as well as the contemporary city become an a-temporal system, where the central-city, the compact-city, the archipelago-city, the mobile-city, the laboratory-city, the body-city, and so on, coexist, mix, bud and follow one another. Perulli dwells on the urban transformations due to the process of globalization and criticizes the long-standing tendency to design urban entities «without a centre»: amorphous realities «devoid of orientation and structure» (p. 35). A sentence that seems to recall one of Calvino's cities even literally.

Perulli also focuses on cities that represent a «frame», that is, a cognitive framework for some a-territorial flows of delocalized, dispersed and fragmented actors, as Simmel and Goffman said when discussing social life in early metropolises. The same, in his opinion, could be repeated as concerns certain contemporary cities, such as the global city-regions, which have developed under the influence of powerful multinational and transnational corporations (p. 38).

On the other hand, the new cities, due to the intersection of material and immaterial flows, present boundaries that are increasingly less physically traced, like the «invisible city» that Mumford (1961) referred to in the final part of his book. This definition probably inspired the title of Calvino's novel, which, implicitly but clearly, describes the «commodification» of the human beings entailed by some present urban realities.

The decades that separate us from *Invisible Cities* seem to have partly bridged this distance: the fragmentation to which Calvino submits some of his cities recalls that carried out in recent years by some sociologists. The *flâneur* of Giampaolo Nuvolati (2013), perhaps the most Calvinian Italian sociologist, moves slowly and without preconceived schemes to discover urban space, and, like Calvino's Marco Polo, recounts the cities he encounters starting from seemingly disconnected and insignificant details. The city changes according to the gaze of those who live in it and observe it. The scholar who adopts an emotional and experiential hermeneutics can connect with the soul of the places and better understand the city. The atrium of a station, the

entrance to a hospital, the churchyard become crossroads of meanings. Space is deconstructed into narratives and, in this way, acquires meaning. In this way, the scholar acts as a «metropolitan poet», entering into a narrative dimension that, despite the different context, is not far from that of Calvino, repeatedly recalled.

In a subsequent work, Nuvolati (2019) decomposed urban space into small and humble elements, true «interstices» loaded with social density, in which one can trace the same emotional and experiential components that were foundational to Calvino's urban culture: memory, desire, nostalgia. The dimension of the everyday and lived experience creates the urban fabric, gives meaning to the places and builds communities.

In this hermeneutic process of conceptual fragmentation of the city, we must remember the work by Robert Beauregard (2015), whose almost dreamlike-fabulistic contributions would not be out of place in *Invisible Cities*. The smart city is presented by him as the «evil twin of the slow city»: an image that recalls the duality of Calvino's Berenice. The city, moreover, is rethought by him as a «heterogeneous» reality, meaning a complex system, constituted and populated by «non-human» elements, both animate and inanimate, such as animals, rivers, sewage systems, tram lines, cables and sensors, which, together with humans, create urban space (pp. 11-13). Beauregard's thought evidently expresses a new post-human and animal-rights cultural sensitivity, which, like in a Calvino story, makes «visible» what is invisible. What he describes seems a futuristic and science-fictional world, but is our world, just like the urban universe of *Invisible Cities*.

We find a more pragmatic approach in Mark Purcell (2022). He explains that, in an age ominously marked by the return to fascism, we have to find a new «strength»: the city is the space where we have to build (and stage) an intellectual and practical resistance. He catches an interesting relation between Calvino's *Invisible cities* and a work published two years before: Henri Lebevre's *La révolution urbain* (1970). The «capitalist city» of Lebevre—where people are trained to become consumers rather than citizens and are made politically passive by isolation—is viewed as a kind of Calvinian dystopia that reflects the real world. Exactly as Calvino's novel, it gives us «an intellectual and emotional orientation» to take action.

The most important lesson we can learn from *Invisible Cities* is precisely this. Cities, for better or worse, are our world: we can design them, invent them and dream of them but, above all, we must live them. Literature and social sciences are nothing but bridges between these different dimensions.

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