

Bruno Latour, Émilie Hermant

Paris Ville Invisible [*Paris: Invisible City*], Paris, B42, 2021, pp. 184
[reedition of *Paris Ville Invisible*, Paris, La Découverte, 1998]

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Why is *Paris Ville Invisible* considered one of actor-network theory's (afterwards: ANT) most influential pieces? To answer this question, I will focus on the book's major contribution to ANT's intellectual project while reviewing Éditions B42's newly published edition of Bruno Latour and Émilie Hermant's original piece from 1998.

Paris Ville Invisible emerged from an unease that characterises ANT's core premise of avoiding structural explanations of social phenomena. In the 2021 preface, Bruno Latour expresses how he never understood how sociologists were so adept at explaining social phenomena. This is where Émilie Hermant, presented amusingly in the preface as a hobby photographer as well as an eminent researcher, came up with the idea to photograph the emergence of collective concerns. Inspired by Italo Calvino's *Le città invisibili*, both embarked on a journey *inside* Paris to collect, make visible and visualize the city without assuming it as a whole. It was their mission to make Paris visible by keeping it invisible; or, put differently, by showing how impossible it was to make Paris appear as a whole, to be *one*. The new edition and the original piece thus mix photo-essay and textual passages that allow us to explore the city of Paris in myriad ways.

The hybrid organisation of the book follows ANT's experimental writing genre: it contains *séquences* (4), *figures* (13) and *plans* (55). The four *séquences* – *cheminer* (walking), *dimensionner* (scaling), *distribuer* (distributing), *permettre* (enabling) – show how the city of Paris can be viewed as things; how social phenomena can be aggregated, calculated, sorted, grouped, related, measured, or quantified according to an assortment of apparatuses that are put together to follow the directions “in sequence”. The scene shifts from Mme Baysal's office, where she organizes and allots *École des Mines*' lecture rooms from her desk, making telephone calls, filling in schedules, and filing papers, to *Météo-France*, where one of its employers is talking to the National television about the reports they had sent earlier. These *plans* portray situations in which Paris becomes either a geographical entity, a bureaucratic designation or even a street sign. The *figures* display how these settings are co-articulated, aligned, or circled in various operational gestures. Following what has been called the “sociology of translation”, that is ANT, we have various chains of events in which information is passed on, moulded, fabricated, and ultimately transformed. Hence, there is no difference between a file that has to be classified in a folder by a university assistant, a name tag pinned to a shirt to facilitate

identification or a café bill printed by a machine. All these “translations” are aggregates and need to be analysed on their own since, for instance, the metro report never reflects the weather exactly.

What made me say before this book was influential? Aside from not having been published with an anglophone publisher, the book does not appear as a major reference in Latour’s publication list or most of early-ANT’s referential articles. Even the oversized French edition from 1998 was out of print for a long time and not reprinted by any publisher. Yet, Latour and Hermant’s piece is of particular importance to STS scholars, precisely for those who have taken an interest in the ways (urban) infrastructures are involved in technological and political disputes, in maintenance and care practices, or sensors and algorithms (Denis and Pontille 2014; Tironi and Criado 2015). Accordingly, the multiplicity of compositions of what a city is, as shown by *Paris Ville Invisible* has laid the groundwork and inspired nearly all of the prosaic STS movements that employ the urban as a reassembled research object. This applies to STS scholars who are interested in the coexistence of urban infrastructures, signs, and politics, as well as urban scholars searching for a companionable but unconventional “fellow” in ANT. This is why we might argue that *Paris Ville Invisible* offers as much a peek into modalities of “invisible” action as it does into the emergence of material-semiotic associations that bind all sorts of entities into hybrid collectives.

Apart from launching ANT into disciplinary fields that are concerned with urban phenomena and their related infrastructures or activities, *Paris Ville Invisible* offers a heuristic device for identifying the invisibility of layers of action: the *oligopticon*. Consider a computer displaying a coloured map of Paris on one of those old grey cubes. On it, you can see nothing of Paris but a map showing the city’s boundaries and some charts of water flow meters. We have two things here, first, the megalomaniacal confusion between a map and a territory and second, the belief that one “dominates” all of Paris simply by looking at it. An enthralling feature of the book is how bureaucratic procedures or daily encounters with technologies, like scientific protocols or technical reports, or any kind of transaction for that matter, bind objects to a reality. As such, signs on streets and subways carry significance not because they mark locations or indicate directions, but because they articulate the coexistence of “successions” (time) and “simultaneities” (space) (p. 168). Objects such as synoptic maps, models, reports, signs, or bills become entangled in kaleidoscopic practices through which a city can be regulated, calculated, inhabited. The objects offer sometimes mere “panoramic views” that are weakly connected to what they depict, and sometimes these objects are implicated in various prosaic practices that are central to the condition of water regulation, electricity systems, infrastructure maintenance or the performativity of any urban inscription.

One of the core characteristics of ANT is here empirically demonstrated by the way it pays attention to simultaneities, or to put it in more common ANT vocabulary, modes of “coexistence” (p. 169). In addition to the book’s analytical intent to examine how action unfolds in irreducible form, the main focus is on how intermediaries turn action into knowledge, and models into action. ANT reveals one of its particular abilities here which places everything on the same plane of existence yet it distinguishes between the various modes through which things exist: from collected data such as time or temperature, to their computation via sensors or computers to the models and maps created by institutions such as law enforcement, weather forecasters, and telecom operators. It is here that one of ANT’s core research inclinations is presented to the reader in full capacity through the demonstration of the relationship between modes of existence and the establishment of those modes. In the absence of cause-effect relations, *Paris Ville Invisible* is an example of ANT’s imaginary to describe a world in constant transformation, a sequence of connections and simultaneities in which each mode or entity fully participates.

It may be worthwhile juxtaposing *Paris Ville Invisible* with one of ANT’s most prominent, and most frequently cited, yet, most atypical pieces: *Reassembling the Social* (2005). In this book, Latour offers a fully-fledged alternative to the traditional social theory, which he believes is prone to failure in offering social explanations. In contrast, he proposes ANT’s “sociology of associations”. By disqualifying traditional social theories, Latour paves the way to a “sociology” concerned with tracing the mediations that give rise to collectives. Besides its aims to position ANT in relation to social theory, *Reassembling the Social* can also be read in parallel with *Paris Ville Invisible*. In fact, the invitation is formulated by Bruno Latour himself in the opening pages of *Reassembling the Social*, and the digital version even contains a hyperlink that provides access to what is described as a “sociological web opera”. In the link, we are directed to the website of *Paris Ville Invisible* offering much of what is covered in *Reassembling the Social* theoretically through a series of photos and concrete situations. We have here a multimedia essay that reflects many of the mediations encountered in the field through photography. On the webpage, one can see the city in images and signs which is, according to Latour, why it’s impossible to grasp it at a glance.

Here may also lie the explanation as to why the book remained out of stock for nearly two decades without being re-edited, and why it was never published in English. The text was meant to be read alongside the photography and images in a multimedia version. The goal is to provide a journey through the hidden places which make urban life in Paris possible, or, as mentioned above, to explore *oligoptica* from which the city can be seen as a partial whole. This is achieved by juxtaposing urban reality and electronic utopias; by contrasting the real and the virtual. Beyond achievement, this

is a demonstration of how the invisible city of Paris can alter social theory. Through highlighting the fact that society is complex, both partially visible and invisible, and how knowledge and reality have never been linear, but always rely on mediations and inscriptions (i.e., maps, street signs, satellite images, etc.). Zooming out, two other themes stand out as central: the recurring theme of “composition” and the idea that Paris constitutes an assemblage or amalgam: “from the entire Paris set in one view to the multiple Parises within Paris, which together comprise all Paris and which nothing ever resembles” (p. 23, my translation). A theme that is at the core of ANT’s entry into urban studies (Fariás 2010).

The virtual is another topic that frequently appears throughout the book and can be depicted if we look at the rest of the citation figuring above: “we are going, in this little book, from the cold and real society, to the hot and virtual plasma: from the entire Paris ...”. Even though Latour and Hermant do not explicitly explain how they conceptualize the virtual, it is important to recognize it as part of ANT’s analytical styles which experiments with linguistic repertoires. Not only is there a difference in how words “act” between French and English, but words become tools to think and experiment within the ANT imaginary. A demonstration of this is offered by Latour’s homonymous essay, which compared to the book has an addition in its title: “the plasma” (Latour 2012). By using *plasma*, Latour substitutes the word *space*, which carries a too rigid connotation, with a more fluid concept allowing him to better grasp imaginaries of space, place and context (see p. 171). *Plasma* also allows Latour to suspend the zoom on multiple, situated “hot takes” to provide an actual background, or contexts in action – whether political, economic, social, cultural, etc. – to inquire the partial explanation of how one, or a few, of these virtual moments, or how *oligoptica* hang together. *Plasma* is a way of questioning composition; it is a way of suspending the zoom.

The new edition is now published by Éditions B42, an editor who deals with architectural books publishing in an avant-gardism style. There may be plenty of reasons why Éditions B42 is reediting the book 20 years after its initial publication with La Découverte in 1998. It goes without saying that Latour’s accomplishments in disciplines including law, ecology, political science or architecture are indisputable, which is not surprising given his *a-disciplinary* generosity of thought over his lifetime and especially in the last few years. Although some of his work, not the least its ANT-fractions, have not been fully refined in response to the empirical research of the various field. Consequently, Latour’s arguments sometimes become frictionless models rather than provocations to open up disciplines. Yet, rather than only being taken *à la lettre*, ANT’s intellectual project, as it can be seen by *Paris Ville Invisible*, offers a repertoire full of moments, trajectories, vocabularies, and genres. The book *Paris Ville Invisible* is one of those hidden gems every ANT-aficionado should have in their library, even

if they do not read French. Aside from providing an array of tools for problematizing cities, as well as exploring how to conduct fieldwork in the myriad, but invisible *oligoptica* of cities-in-the-making, it is also a more-than-textual writing experiment that combines both photographic and essayistic genres. More so, *Paris Ville Invisible* is a thoughtful exploration into inventive ways of writing; it is full of tropes into Frenchness, hints at the popularisation of Paris in films, novels, and souvenirs and stands for a whole generation of ANT that is preoccupied with composing texts that reflect the heterogeneity of the worlds that are enacted.

Afterwords

The entire book review was written before Bruno Latour's passing and should not be read as an obituary but as a tribute to the broader lessons that Latour's work and ANT's early generation have taught us, especially to STS and urban researchers. Lessons for which I will be forever grateful.

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Digital Capitalism: Media, Communication and Society Volume Three, London, Routledge, 2021, pp. 342

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Christian Fuchs's work is well known by whoever has navigated sociology of media and communication in the last fifteen years. Since the monumental *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age* (Fuchs