Italo Calvino’s prose is justly famous. The accumulation of unexpected detail, the vivid and unexpected imagery, and the alliterative listing of objects, people, and their properties continually create unforeseen pleasures. It is not to ignore Calvino’s literary achievements that I call attention to another aspect of his work.

Calvino belonged to the Parisian literary group OULIPO (Ouvroir de Litterature Potentiel), another well-known member being Georges Perec, who remarked that about a quarter of his work could be classified as "sociological," and some of whose work can profitably be seen as a kind of sociology: a description of social reality that contains, even if implicitly, social theories or, at least, the raw materials for such theories.

Calvino’s work that most lends itself to a similarly sociological analysis—Invisible Cities (Calvino 1974)—is, on the surface, a series of conversations between an aging Kublai Khan and a young Marco Polo. Khan sees that his empire has grown so vast that it cannot be effectively governed, that it is "an endless, formless ruin" and that only in Polo’s accounts can he see "the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites’ gnawing." "Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions..." but he listens attentively to the fifty-five short descriptions of cities. So do we.

Polo describes each city by focusing on some dominant characteristic of its geographical situation, its building arrangements, its social practices, or much more subtle matters, occasionally explicitly indicating the major consequence of that dominant trait. So he first describes Diomira:

The special quality of this city for the man who arrives there on a September evening, when the days are growing shorter and the multicolored lamps are lighted all at once at the doors of the food stalls and from a terrace a woman’s voice cries ooh!, is that he feels envy toward those who now believe they have once before lived an evening identical to this and who think they were happy, that time.

The language is evocative, even erotic ("a woman’s voice cries ooh!", and there is pleasure enough in that. Perhaps sociological matters need not be added. But the accumulation of fifty-five such descriptions leaves the reader feeling that there is something here beyond the layering of evocative images, that the book’s title says it is about cities because Calvino has something to tell us about cities.

What cities is he telling us about? For the most part, at least until toward the end of the book, not real cities, not thinly disguised versions of Paris or
London or New York, in many cases not cities which could exist at all, not if we take the descriptions literally, though perhaps if they are seen as metaphors. But even so some descriptions do seem to talk about recognizable cities. Esmeralda is made up of both streets and canals, is easily taken as a semi-realistic version of Venice, though the observations he makes about it are perhaps not what we would expect. (Real cities of the past and present appear in the later conversations of the two men, and even imaginary cities of literature and myth. So San Francisco and New Atlantis are evoked in their talk and in Khan's perusal of his fabulous atlas.)

Where are the cities located? Polo presumably travels all over the known world, but during his lifetime far fewer places were known or existed than in centuries to come. The cities are often identified as being on seacoasts or the edges of deserts and seem, from the descriptions of people and objects, to be mainly in Europe and parts of Asia; not, probably, in the Americas.

Calvino warns us to beware of names, but the names have a flavor: romantic, vaguely mediterranean, vaguely oldfashioned, almost all ending in vowels that are, in English and the Romance languages, feminine in feel and grammar.

When are the cities located? Since Marco Polo is describing them to Kublai Khan, they presumably date from their era, the late 13th Century. Much of the voluptuous detail of the descriptions of the cities is congruent with that. But some isn't, especially later in the book, where we read, disconcertingly, about garbage trucks and cars and airports and cranes and bulldozers and other contemporary machinery.

One clue to what Calvino wants to tell us about cities lies in the subdivisions of the book. The fifty-five descriptions consist of eleven sets of five cities each, under a variety of tantalizing headings: Cities and memory, Cities and desire, Cities and signs, Thin cities, Trading cities, Cities and eyes, Cities and names, Cities and the dead, Cities and the sky, Continuous cities, Hidden cities. These are interleaved in a complicated numerical order whose meaning is not apparent, which I suspect is a typical OULIPO creation: a systematically arbitrary arrangement of the work's parts. Each names a heading under which things can be said about cities and surprising features called to our attention. Some features are mundane physical facts, some point to aspects of how people respond to cities, some are fanciful "what ifs" which challenge our belief in some ordinarily unquestioned feature of social life.

Calvino means us to think that these cities transcend time. This idea appears explicitly from time to time in the conversations of Khan and Polo. For all the specific detail of Polo's descriptions, they do not embody or allude to a specific historical period or real place (in the way, say, that Weber's analysis of the Protestant Ethic relates to a specific historical time and place), but rather describe features of urban life and organization that, though they
take different forms in different places and epochs, are nevertheless universal.

We think that Calvino is, after all, telling us something important about cities because we can extract generalizations about urban life from these parables. Each calls our attention to something intrinsic in the organization of city life, some dimension along which cities, or people’s responses, vary. These features are universal: they will be found in all cities. They may not all have the same water supply, for instance, but they must all supply their people with clean water and dispose of dirty water, and how they do it will be related in some intelligible way to other features of the city’s life.

Making such generalizations is the normal work of urban sociology. We compare cities along such dimensions as population size and components, geographical structure, “problems,” even such intangibles as “culture” and “tradition.” We might say, hoping not to demean his work by using this prosaic, scientistic way of talking about it, that Calvino adds some new variables to these standard operations, new dimensions along which cities can fruitfully be compared, even though sociologists have not done so in the past, or have not done so systematically. The new dimensions are embodied in the stories Polo tells Khan and in their discussions of them.

The “method” Calvino uses to construct his theory of city life is explained in eighteen dialogues between the Emperor and the traveler which explore many theoretical and epistemological positions. As we listen to them argue, we see the advantages and disadvantages of each position, as well as the impossibility of definitively choosing among them. The dialogical format encourages this indeterminacy. We are not reading a treatise which comes to a conclusion, but rather a discussion in which alternatives are considered, weighed, tried out, rejected, surpassed, returned to. The dialogues explore but do not resolve the “methodological” problem of how to understand a city.

Calvino’s “Methodology”

Calvino makes, in the dialogues between Khan and Polo, a number of remarks on the epistemology of social science. These remarks are not social science dicta but are, rather, items in their conversations about the status and meaning of the descriptions of cities Polo is presenting to Khan. Their “methodological” agreements and disagreements serve dramatic and characterological purposes as well as “scientific” ones. But they certainly are remarks on problems of method that continue to worry social scientists.
Khan and Polo recognize the empirical basis of knowledge. They are subtle about this. On the one hand, they know that facts are shaped by our ideas. We see what our ideas prepare us to see. On the other hand, you can't control facts by manipulating ideas; facts are recalcitrant and will not be just any damn thing we want them to be. So the specifics of the cities Polo describes are not just things he could invent to suit himself. They are what they are and any general ideas we hold must be congruent with them. As Khan tells Polo: "From now on I shall describe the cities and you will tell me if they exist and are as I have conceived them." [p. 43] Khan's descriptions will undergo an empirical test.

They discuss the connection between the specific case and the general rule, between the description of a specific city, real or imaginary, and some general law about how cities are organized and function, about their histories and eventual fate. This too is a standard and perennial problem of social science method.

They recognize that Polo's descriptions imply dimensions of urban life, which must be accounted for in any description of any city. Here I go beyond what is explicit in the text of their talk. It may be useful to think of these as "problems" cities have to solve. The city of Fedora, for instance, preserves its multiple possible futures as tiny crystal globes in a museum. This reminds us that every city will do something with its possible futures. To say that these are general problems or dimensions implies, further, that any specific city will have some specific way of dealing with the preservation of potential futures: a city might preserve its futures, suppress them, ignore or forget them. "Our futures" are present, one way or another, in all cities.

Each specific city description implies at least one such dimension, and the full set of Polo's descriptions implies a large number of such dimensions. Since there are an enormous number of possible ways for a city to deal with each dimension, the number of potential combinations is enormous. It's a problem in combinatorics.

These analytic possibilities can be thought of in several ways. You can say that, knowing this general set of dimensions, you know all you need to know, every place is just a version of the general law. Khan says:

And yet 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.

Polo proposes an alternative:

[a model] made only of exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions. If such a city is the most improbable, by reducing the number of abnormal elements, we increase the probability that the city really exists. So I have only to subtract exceptions from my model, and in whatever direction I proceed, I will arrive at one of the cities which, always as an exception, exist. But I cannot force
my operation beyond a certain limit: I would achieve cities too probable to be real.

This makes understanding cities like the game of chess; once you know the rules and laws, that's all you need. But, Khan worries, that's too abstract, leaves too much out, chess just leaves you with a piece of wood, a chessboard. Polo immediately points out that there is a lot to know about a piece of wood.

Or you can say that once you know one city well, that's all you need because the generalizations about all the other cities are contained in it. When Khan asks why Polo never mentions Venice, Polo says,

"Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice... To distinguish the other cities' qualities, I must speak of a first city that remains implicit. For me it is Venice."

This emphasizes the utility of comparing specific cities as a way of discovering new dimensions of city life. When we look at multiple cases, the familiar case is the contrasting background that makes new features and dimensions visible. Conversely, trying to understand the unfamiliar and strange awakens you to aspects of the familiar until then unnoticed. This occurs both between different cities, and between the present and the past. And it provides a rationale for investigating imaginary cases, what might have been but didn't come to pass: "dead branches of the past."

Here, briefly, are some other rules of analytic method found in the dialogues between Khan and Polo:

"From the number of imaginable cities we must exclude those whose elements are assembled without a connecting thread, an inner rule, a perspective, a discourse."[...]. "Cities... believe they are the work of the mind or of chance, but neither the one nor the other suffices to hold up their walls,"[...] that is, neither are sufficient explanations of anything. Every element of the whole is important. No whole exists without parts, no parts mean anything without reference to a whole. [...] Memory is changeable, not trustworthy. And yet "The form of things can be discerned better at a distance," in time as well as in space. [...] What is the best place to describe from? It's good to be at a distance to make conclusions.

The aim of all descriptions of cities is to know how to live, to see what is coming and accept it and become part of it or, better, see what could make life better and make those things endure. Imagining cities lets you search for the perfection that would produce happiness, and that is a major goal of the work.

Calvino's Theory of Cities
The short descriptions of cities contain ideas Calvino means us to apply beyond the particular imaginary city Polo is talking about. We learn, for instance, that Eutropia (a "trading city") is made up of many cities, all but one of them empty, and that its inhabitants periodically tire of their lives, their spouses, their work, and then move en masse to the next city, where they will have new mates, new houses, new jobs, new views from their windows, new friends, pastimes, and subjects of gossip. We learn further that, in spite of all this moving, nothing changes since, although different people are doing them, the same jobs are being done and, though new people are talking, the same things are being gossiped about. This suggests a sociological generalization: in every city there is a body of social practices--forms of marriage, or work, or habitation--which don't change much, even though the people who perform them are continually replaced through the ordinary demographic processes of birth, death, immigration, and emigration. Plus ça change.

Each of the fifty-five cities Polo describes suggests some such generalization. Many of the cities amplify, comment on, or suggest a change in a generalization made by a previous vignette. So, after reading about Eutropia's unchanging structure and changing population, we hear about Melania, whose life can be described as a collection of perpetual dialogues:

The braggart soldier and the parasite coming from a door meet the young wastrel and the prostitute; or else the miserly father from his threshold utters his final warnings to the amorous daughter and is interrupted by the foolish servant who is taking a note to the procuress.

People die and are born but the dialogues continue unchanged:

The population renews itself: the participants in the dialogues die one by one and meanwhile those who will take their places are born, some in one role, some in another. When one changes role or abandons the square forever or makes his first entrance into it, there is a series of changes, until all the roles have been reassigned; [but the same scenes continue to be played with the same characters] even if none of them keeps the same eyes and voice he had in the previous scene.

Which adds to the generalization evoked by Eutropia that these unvarying practices are embodied in traditional roles and scripts, another way of saying that cities have a characteristic culture.

My remarks on Calvino's theoretical findings about cities that follow are incomplete and cursory; they do not extract all the lessons of the book. Each city could serve as the basis of an extended commentary. I will mention a few ideas and illustrate Calvino's exposition of them at length.

To repeat, an actual or imagined city can be taken to represent a particular position on one or more dimensions of variation. So, for example, there is a continuum whose poles are just and unjust, on which a just city like Berenice seems to occupy a single position. But, in
In the seed of the city of the just, a malignant seed is hidden, in its turn: the certainty and pride of being in the right and of being more just than many others who call themselves more just than the just. This seed ferments in bitterness, rivalry, resentment; and the natural desire of revenge on the unjust is colored by a yearning to be in their place and act as they do. Another unjust city, though different from the first, is digging out its space within the double sheath of the unjust and just Berenices.

One characteristic may seem dominant or the only one present, but the other pole of the continuum is there too: Berenice contains an unjust city waiting to take the place of the just one, and that unjust city in turn contains a just city waiting to replace it:

Having said this, I do not wish your eyes to catch a distorted image, so I must draw your attention to an intrinsic quality of this unjust city germinating inside the secret just city; and this is the possible awakening as if in an excited opening of windows of a later love for justice, not yet subjected to rules, capable of reassembling a city still more just than it was before it became the vessel of injustice. But if you peer deeper into this new germ of justice you can discern a tiny spot that is spreading like the mounting tendency to impose what is just through what is unjust, and perhaps this is the germ of an immense metropolis... All the future Berenices are already present in this instant, wrapped one within the other, confined, crammed, inextricable.

This suggests a dialectical proposition: there is no justice which does not call forth injustice, no X which does not imply the necessary existence of non-X, not just in logic but in reality. He embodies this in the story of Moriana, which has a beautiful face but also an ugly obverse; the two can neither be separated from one another nor look at each other.

A city may occupy the opposing poles in a regular rhythm (changing from one to the other every six months, as a city which caters to tourists might change between "the season" and the rest of the year) or historically (changing from one form to the other slowly, over centuries) but they are always both there, even though one is hidden, dormant, or invisible. Calvino often uses a spatial metaphor for the relationship of the two: one form of the city is in the sky, while the other is on earth; one is on earth, the other is underground. Sometimes, as with Valdrada, he speaks of a city and its reflection, and wonders which is more valuable, the reality or the reflection.

The stories caution us not to be too quick to judge which variation is more admirable. Beersheba aims for the virtues of a celestial city, but the underground city, whose characteristics they try to avoid, is really the perfect one: Beersheba is "a city which, only when it shits, is not miserly, calculating, greedy."
These opposites may have quasi-causal relations. Changes in one cause changes in the other. The inhabitants of Thekla are continually building. When Polo asks what plan guides their activity, they tell him to wait until sunset:

"Work stops at sunset. Darkness falls over the building site. The sky is filled with stars. "There is the blueprint," they say.

Such plans do not necessarily produce the intended result, which suggests a general thought about the efficacy of planning. The people of Perinthia also used the heavens to guide their building, "following the astronomers' calculations precisely." In Perinthia's streets and square today you encounter cripples, dwarfs, hunchbacks, obese men, bearded women. But the worse cannot be seen; guttural howls are heard from cellars and lofts, where families hide children with three heads or six legs. Perinthia's astronomers are faced with a difficult choice. Either they must admit that all their calculations were wrong and their figures unable to describe the heavens, or else they must reveal that the order of the gods is reflected exactly in the city of monsters.

The causal arrow may run in the opposite direction to what we might imagine. Andria's arrangements reflect the arrangements in the heavens too. But not because the city mimics the heavens. No, the inhabitants assure him, whenever they change the city, the stars change accordingly. The astronomers, after each change takes place in Andria [a new statue, a river port, a toboggan slide], peer into their telescopes and report a nova's explosion, or a remote point in the firmament's change of color from orange to yellow, the expansion of a nebula, the bending of a spiral of the Milky Way.

Many of the cities suggest ideas about the relation of structure to function. You can, as in Dorothea, deduce everything there is to know about the city from its spatial plan". . . you can then work from these facts until you learn everything you wish about the city in the past, present, and future." [p. 9] But a plan need not tie functions to places: : "In every point of this city [Zoe] you can, in tum, sleep, make tools, cook, accumulate gold, disrobe, reign, sell, question oracles." The structure may be a sort of empty shell "This city [Zora] which cannot be expunged from the mind is like an armature, a honeycomb in whose cells each of us can place the things he wants to remember: names of famous men, virtues, numbers, vegetable and mineral classifications, dates of battles, constellations, parts of speech."

Cities have two kinds of structures. The first is a network. Some imaginary cities are no more than networks: nothing is left of Armilla but its system for distributing water (now inhabited by the beings who would most appreciate that, naiads); in Ersilia relationships are represented by strings running between places: "When the strings become so numerous that you can no longer pass among them, the inhabitants leave; the houses are dismantled; only the strings and their supports remain." A city
can thus be understood fully as a network of relationships, of which there are many kinds. Zaira consists of:

relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past: the height of a lamppost and the distance from the ground of the usurper's swaying feet . . . the height of that railing and the leap of the adulterer who climbed over it at dawn . . . . The city . . . does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of streets, the gratings of windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

Other city structures are images of containment. The present city of Olinda contains the Olinda-yet-to-be, the city's historical future, in embryo, as a kind of kernel or seed in its center, which then grows out (an echo of Berenice). Or, like Fedora, the city's museum contains, in crystal globes, the miniature representations of the city it might have become but did not, which are the individual dreams of its various inhabitants. The world (by which we can understand our theories about the world) must have room in it for:

the big stone Fedora and the little Fedoras in the glass globes. Not because they are equally real, but because all are only assumptions. The one contains what is accepted as necessary when it is not yet so; the others, what is imagined as possible and, a moment later, is possible no longer.

Calvino offers historical theories, describing the regular paths along which a city might develop. In a recurring theme, cities grow larger and larger, until they merge into one vast continuous city without boundaries. In one form, the city is continuous but there are airports here and there with different names.

If on arriving at Trude I had not read the city's name written in big letters, I would have thought I was landing at the same airport from which I had taken off . . . . "You can resume your flight whenever you like," they said to me, "but you will arrive at another Trude, absolutely the same, detail by detail. The world is covered by a sole Trude which does not begin and does not end. Only the name of the airport changes."

In Cecilia, the city and the countryside have merged, and everyone looks in the merger for the traces of what they remember and prize. In Leonia, even less happily, the city (and all the other cities around it) generate so much garbage that they merge, at their garbage heap margin, and eventually have to be bulldozed under and started anew (these are two of the places where Calvino exploits anachronism).

Polo and Calvino, finally, caution us that names are misleading. This contains the larger point, of considerable theoretical significance, that things people call by the same name are not necessarily the same. The name may persist, suggesting continuity, when in fact the name is the only similarity between the old and new cities. The names convey a lot of meaning, but the meaning
they convey may have little or nothing to do with a place's reality. In a reflection set off by his experience of Pyrrha, Polo says:

My mind goes on containing a great number of cities I have never seen and will never see, names that bear with them a figure or a fragment or glimmer of an imagined figure. . . . [The imagined city is still there] but I can no longer call it by a name, nor remember how I could ever have given it a name that means something entirely different.

Names (and, by extension, conceptually defined categories) have meaning only from the perspective of the viewer, only from a certain place. So "Irene is a name for a city in the distance, and if you approach, it changes." A good reminder for social scientists so enchanted by words that they mistake them for the real thing.

Literature as Social Theory

If Calvino were really a social theorist, not just in my playful recasting of him and his work, he would not talk about cities as he has in this book. He never mentions, not even once, Max Weber or Emile Durkheim or Karl Marx, let alone more contemporary social theorists. He does not refer to people who wrote specifically about cities: Georg Simmel, Ernest W. Burgess, Louis Wirth. He includes no statistics on population and its components, on the economic situation of the inhabitants. Instead, he provides, through his mouthpiece Marco Polo, fanciful, poetic descriptions of cities. The descriptions do not pretend to describe real places. They rely heavily on details, images which evoke complex thoughts, images which present general ideas metaphorically. The dialogues make the preliminary point that it is much easier to understand specific facts—detailed descriptions of cities—than abstract talk about them.

We social scientists present our ideas about urban life differently. We know what we think we gain by our habitual mode of description: precision, systematicity, the power of abstraction to create logical classes about which generalizations can be made. What has Calvino gained that we have lost by the more abstract descriptive choices we have made? What can we learn from him about cities that we now perhaps know, but have no way of incorporating into our explicit results?

Calvino occasionally speaks of cities as made from "desires and fears," and says that what is unintelligible becomes clear if you approach cities through them. He also remarks that descriptions "smuggle" in emotion and mood, and warns that you have to get rid of these to see, from a distance, the "real forms." Which is a problem social science methods are exactly designed to solve. Of course, since Calvino also does his best to communicate
mood and emotion, this is one of the many rules whose opposite must also be honored.

He communicates the nuances of mood and emotion largely through the description of small details of the cities, as in the mention, in the description of Diomira, of how "from a terrace a woman's voice cries ooh!", or in the mention, in his account of Despina, of "a windjammer about to cast off, with the breeze already swelling the sails, not yet unfurled." And these details do more than set a mood or elicit an emotion; they also provide information that the attentive reader uses to construct an understanding of the nature of the city being talked about.

As a result, each short description is rich in analytic possibilities, far beyond those available in the typical social science analysis. The possibility of using mood and emotion, which I have not much explored here is just one such potential enrichment. Each detail could be, for the right reader, the taking-off place for the analysis of an area of urban life. The woman crying ooh! will push some readers to consider the erotic aspects of urban life (as do many other parts of the book). The windjammer about to set sail might provoke an exploration of forms of travel, of the way the modes of transportation available in a city condition its possibilities and our views of it. Despina "displays one face to the traveler arriving overland and a different one to him who arrives by sea." Because literary descriptions contain so many details capable of such expansion, they make possible the comparisons that provide the analytic distance Khan and Polo sometimes want. This is a kind of paradox: the closeup, detailed look leads to distance.

This stands in direct contrast to urbanologists' desire for clearly defined concepts which let them assign a city to this or that category, to say that this or that feature is dominant or characteristic, so as to produce a definitive analysis. The social scientist's unambiguous concepts produce unambiguous results. The literary description gives up this possibility of clarity and unidimensionality for the ability to make multiple analyses of the multiple possibilities contained in one story.

The analyses that most resemble this way of doing analytic business are the sort of rich ethnographies Geertz praised as "thick description" (Geertz 1974). People who use that method typically know that they are doing something right, but have trouble specifying what kind of right they are doing. The comparison with Calvino's method gives us a more concrete idea of what that is.

Coda

Though Calvino never spoke of what he did as sociologist, we can at least look to his work for clues to how to free ourselves from the tyranny of conventional forms. There is more to say than our forms let us say and more to think as well. Calvino is a source from which we can draw.