

The rise of indexed visibilities

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The Crystal grows in blind material, it is not
meant for the theatre of the eye. The Crystal
resists visibility.

Thomas Hirschhorn, *Crystal of Resistance*

Honey scars I'll keep you near
Our blood is gold nothing to fear
We killed the time and I love you dear
A kiss of wine we'll disappear
The last of the last particles
Divisible invisible
The last of the last particles
Divisible invisible

Massive Attack, *Splitting the Atom*

For better or worse, in social relations visibility *means* and, consequently, it matters. Such a recognition is already something, but, to be true, it is not sufficient in itself. For our endeavor as sociologists, and more amply as social theorists, should be to precisely capture the subtleties of the current socio-historical configurations of the field of inter-visibilitys. This task entails, I think, understanding the criteria and the protocols, but also the ambiguities, the experiences and the resistances associated with visibility. Here rises an issue of “measure” and “measurements”¹. What kind of measures, we are going to ask, are currently applied to visibility in order to create specific differences between different types and different gradients of visibility? How – i.e., following which procedures, using which tools, and applying which units – do we measure the visibility of certain social sites, subjects, phenomena and events? What are the qualities that a

¹ I am indebted to Pierangelo Schiera for his relentless inquiry into the notion of measure. See in particular Schiera (2011).

certain measurement elicits from those sites, subject, phenomena and events? How do certain measured traits turn into veritable properties of said sites, subject, phenomena and events? What effects of invisibility are complementarily created by similar operations of visibilization? Overall, this amounts to ask what sort of social territories do we compose together (i.e., socially) – territories, that is, that are both territories of materially-inscribed meaning (visibility) and territories of normatively relevant socio-technical devices (measures).

Over the last few decades, social theorists have interpreted the importance of visibility mainly in the light of the Hegelian notion of recognition. From this perspective, visibility has been regarded as a condition for the empowerment of social subjects through their reciprocal positioning on an equal standing. Since the 1970s, the struggles of various types of sexual, religious and racial minorities have certainly passed through a discourse of becoming visible in the public space and the public sphere, that is, more widely, the public domain (Brighenti 2010a). However, it has become increasingly clear that there is no possible straightforward equation between visibility and recognition. Twentieth-century mass media research has, at the very least, provided abundant evidence that visibility is patterned, formatted and organized in regimes which determine to a large extent the outcome of single acts of visibilizations.

From this perspective, the Situationist critique of the spectacle consisted in denouncing a type of visibility in which supervisibilized spectacular images are severed from real life and transport viewers into a regime of experience expropriation. Both propaganda (the political, pervasive fabrication of truth, which may attain totalitarian levels) and advertisement (the capitalist economic fabrication of myths of consumption and enjoyment) can be allocated to this type of visibility. In a different domain, Foucault's research into disciplinary rationality finely revealed the existence of a whole set of practices of control, such as the famous "inspection", or examination, in which subjection to power is obtained through self-conscious (or reflexive) visibilization of one's body and one's conduct (subjection through "compulsory visibility"). By absorbing both spectacular and governmental machines, the twentieth-century state has configured itself as both a *propagandist* and a *guardian-voyeur*. It should also be kept into consideration the fact that over the course of the last thirty years or so, surveillance practices have multiplied into an apparently uncoordinated surveillant assemblage (Haggerty and Ericson 2000) in which several different sorts of public and private agencies carry on routine collections of personal data for a variety of purposes ranging from customer service to global security. Specialized techniques of visibilization (so-called *data mining*) are then applied to digital databases to extract complex associations of variables and items.

The current condition of overabundance of data is extremely relevant from the point of view of the meaning which we attribute to visibility. In practice, it may well be that today the crucial stake is no longer an issue of filling the space of social visibility by amplifying a single item (propaganda techniques), nor is it an issue of carefully scrutinizing individual behavior, i.e. zooming on small individual actions (disciplinary techniques). Certainly, both discipline and propaganda are still widely deployed tools. But the new mainstream business increasingly consists in finding the most effective ways of moving across a scenery that is full of data – a veritable *datascape*. The new business, in other words, consists in quantifying, ranking and indexing visibilities.

Here is where some recent developments in social theory seem to be curiously receptive toward such a general societal trend. According to Bruno Latour (2010), for instance, today the thought of late nineteenth century theorist Gabriel Tarde is important, in that it enables us to develop what he calls a “quantitative social ontology”. Contrary to what an extended liberal tradition has taught us, Latour argues, the individual *is* quantitative: we can seize it and measure it. While in the natural sciences we are bound to remain far away from the source of information – so that, *a fortiori*, we can only treat aggregated data – in the social sciences we have the advantage that we can get “very close” to it. The reason is precisely that our source is our fellow human being. A science able to capture the quantitative social ontology, then, would not proceed through general structural laws that refer to large aggregates, but through the analysis of single, countable individual components. Writes Latour (2010: 147): “the more we get into the intimacy of the individual, the more discrete quantities we’ll find”.

“Intimacy” is certainly an intriguing word, which gives us the impression that there will be no surprise when we’ll eventually be able to get *inside* (*intus*) the individual. It may be noteworthy to observe a crucial presupposition in this type of argument: individuals (and their individual components) are entities isomorphic to each other which can consequently be measured with a single system of measurement, a single *mètron* (indeed, it would make no sense to speak about discrete quantities without a unifying unit of measure which enables to capture them). In fact, I think, it is clear that today this type of approach is *already* mainstream: it can be found widely across social and natural disciplines, in theoretical approaches such as agent-based modeling, behavioral economics, game theory, and even genetics. From a certain point of view, it may be welcomed as a radical democratic approach to social entities; but there is a rather darker side to it, which I urge to take into consideration. In this context, I would like to raise the following sensible question: when we assert that individuals are quantitative, are we really talking about *individuals*, or is it rather *dividuals* we are referring to?

Indeed, I would argue, the dividual is but another name for the *population*. And, as Foucault (1978) taught us in his brilliant analysis, the notion of population is a governmental notion whereby we attempt to capture, both epistemically and administratively (or, “bio-politically”), a confused multiplicity of people by cutting it across with to certain analytical traits (even without disaggregating the multiplicity itself). Such traits include, for instance, a number of *indexes* which range from very basic ones – like sex, age, height and weight – to very subtle ones, which capture “immaterial” features such as beliefs, intelligence, aspirations and, obviously, depressions. A population is thus a kind of formatted (*quadrillé*) entity which produces all sorts of quantitative regularities. It produces such regularities insofar as it is interrogated by medical, statistical and administrative disciplines. Also, Foucault added, it must be considered that a population is an entity profoundly grounded in a given materiality and a given environment, whose variables can be manipulated to a lesser or greater extent. The latter observation is crucial to remind that each population qua *dividuality* exists in relation to not only a series of principle of decomposition but also an enveloping atmosphere.

The current interest – or obsession? – with *traceability* is, in my view, an interest – an obsession – with *indexing visibilities*. The rise of indexed visibilities breeds a type of visibility which is, strictly speaking, neither emancipatory (visibility as recognition) nor oppressive (visibility as propaganda and discipline). Rather, we face a curious combination of the two, or even an entirely new third form. Thus, the “participatory” nature of our current visibility games might be an

interesting aspect to consider. Certainly, both recognition and discipline are themselves intrinsically participatory, in that they require collaboration of the involved subjects. This is evident in the case of the phenomenon of disciplinarity described by Foucault, but also in the case of the various dialectics or struggles for recognition theorized by social philosophers such as Honneth. Yet, today the centrality acquired by the notion of traceability seems to invite and even forcefully solicit people's participation on a massively unprecedented scale, with the result that participation cannot be regarded as an unconditionally commendable idea. As I will try to show, this new threshold of intensity attained by participation is due to the way in which we compose social territories under contemporary conditions. Following Tarde, Latour has insisted on the importance of small-scale conversations which create large-scale movements of ideas. Latour argues that we social scientists are now in the position of mapping to the tiniest details the traces of those conversations as they move through social space. Tarde himself predicted the coming of an age of publics (Tarde 1901: §I), in which the right of each individual to spread "his own particular faith" would have ultimately been recognized (Tarde 1890: §VIII, I)².

Tarde is definitely the great social theorist of currents, circulations and movements of ideas through conversations. However, conversation does no longer seem to be an appropriate term to designate what happens, for instance, with new social media. It is not simply that the styles and formats of conversation have changed. Rather, the point is that contemporary datascares are territories whose "capacity" is put under constant strain by overcrowding. If crowds were a typical late nineteenth-century obsession for urban observers, now we are facing a veritable return of crowds, in the shape of crowds of data and information (one of the best theorists of crowds, Elias Canetti, described angels themselves as crowds). Contrary to the symmetric model of conversation, in which the two (*inter-acting*) parts try to persuade each other and territorialize themselves on certain shared beliefs and desires, in datascares we move through crowds of data and information which never amount to more than thin ice. Accumulation (overload) is constant but, upon scrutiny, we soon realize that we can never really rely on anything in terms of evidence upon which some stable beliefs or desire could be based. Here, territorial takes are constantly in great danger of material and semiotic saturation – saturation meaning precisely the point in which information turns into sheer uselessness. Visibility becomes widely available to anyone but the excess of visibility hampers visibility itself and turns, not single items, but purposeful procedures of visibilization into the most valuable commodities.

If we observe, for instance, the practices of online tweeting and posting and facebooking and youtubing, we may grant that such practices are not automatic: people are not mere automata that pass received information on: we are all producers now. But, simultaneously, we should also acknowledge that those subjects are not free either. Not simply because of the deceptive user-empowerment ideology that pervades the new media ("You, You, You: You Can, Express Yourself, Broadcast Yourself, Perform Yourself..."), which however should always be kept in

2 More precisely, Tarde (1890) predicts a shift from dogmatic, one-way communication (teaching), to democratic, two-way communication (expression of everyone's ideas): "Au début, un homme monopolise toujours le pouvoir et le droit d'enseigner ; nul ne le lui conteste. Tout ce qu'il dit doit être cru de tous, et lui seul a le droit de rendre des oracles. Mais, à la longue, chez ceux qui boivent avec le plus de crédulité toutes les paroles du maître, naît le désir d'être infaillible comme lui, de lui ressembler encore en cela. De là des efforts de génie chez des philosophes qui finiront un jour par faire reconnaître à chaque individu le droit de propager sa foi particulière et d'évangéliser même ses anciens apôtres."

mind. Each of us turns into one “last of the last particles, divisible invisible”. While in the 1970s the rhizome was celebrated as an emancipatory social morphology, today it would be but naive and delusive to trust on some alleged liberating potential of horizontal networks. While for Deleuze and Guattari (1980) the rhizome was defined by the coming about of *lines of flight*, today’s networks are rather defined by *secured connections*. Closure has definitely triumphed over openness – at least until closure becomes asphyxiation. Perhaps, it is the paradigm of *reaction* (Starobinski 1999) which might provide us with a useful notion to understand contemporary circulations. In the “always online” ideology, for instance, reactivity comes to dominate the scene. Here, by reaction I do not refer to those theories of communication, such as Garfinkel’s and Luhmann’s, that locate meaning in the coupling of reaction and action rather than action alone. Instead, I am precisely concerned with underlining the difference between *information* and *meaning*. Information is extensive, meaning is intensive. Starobinski’s extraordinary philosophical-historical exploration reveals the ambiguous presence of the notion of reaction in both vitalist and mechanistic thinking. In different ways, we react in our capacity of either automata (interpreters of information) or organisms (growers of meaning). In both cases, reaction involves a peculiar social relation whereby, in a given environment or a given atmosphere, a specific *threshold of activation* is reached by an actor-agent.

What is this threshold of activation? In other words: how do we call it, how do we describe it, and how do we measure it? Activation is a feature inscribed into territories which are complex forms of material experimentation in multiple immanent encounters occurring within a “synodic” or “assemblear” social subject, where reaction produces *chain reactions* (hence, traceability). And activation is a specifically mono-dimensional act which only makes sense in the context of a given multi-dimensional and manifold social territory. Once translated onto the field of contemporary social visibilities, this consideration leads me to the thesis that reacting entails being taken in a game of inter-visibilities of people, events and sites, which virtually erases (by preemption) discussion about the measure applied to the processes and the procedures of visibilization themselves. In this sense, it comes as no surprise that *reaction is reactionary*. Indeed, the hypervisibilization of single social sites, subjects, phenomena and events preempts our capacity to grasp the whole architecture of visibility at stake. As we are literally fed with information (news feeds), we increasingly overlook meaning, and simply go ahead with doing: the return of *cogitatio caeca*. The paradigm of reaction brings about the dominance of a type of activity and acting which are not empowering. Participation is not, strictly speaking, *compulsory*, but – as practiced and tested on the ground – it tends to become *compulsive*.

Consequently, production and codification – two intellectual keywords of 1970s social theory – are no longer useful images to grasp contemporary societal dynamics. Strictly speaking, we do not produce visibilities (but simply prolong them and carry them around) and we do not code them (but simply frame them, unwrap and activate them). The reason is that visibilities are not items, but *qualities*. And the dream (as well as nightmare) of our age is the *calculation of qualities*. I wrote dream but, of course, meant business. The business is called, for instance, “measuring excellence”. When excellence is reduced to a mere quantity, one might be tempted to say that some sort of democratization has been attained, insofar as excellence is de-transcendentalized and understood as merely anything that lies beyond certain given thresholds (a *percentile*). But the small tiny detail we should pay attention to is: what about the invisibilization of visibility criteria? This amounts to ask: participatory *what?* (Brighenti 2010b). While it is relatively easy – yet important – to sketch a phenomenology of participation, it is extremely difficult to

understand the extended consequences of this practice. The contemporary setup of the field of visibility entails at least two crucial effects: the first is the coming to dominance of the paradigm of reaction discussed above, the second is the installation of criteria-keepers that are visibility-givers and themselves “beyond measurement”.

A few crucial actors bestow visibility according to specific logics and criteria; the majority of other actors try to position single-item visibilities in the field: they crusade for their own little visibility. Jointly, the paradigm of reaction and the discourse of participation give birth to complex logistic maneuvers in which collaboration is often strategically (cynically) deployed. Let us quickly consider, for instance, what is happening in the academic publishing sector. In this field, as we more or less bitterly know, journals struggle for their impact factor, and scholars struggle for their citation-index and their h-index, while corporate publishers collect the shares of these indexed visibilities from public libraries around the world and, as one commentator has aptly phrased it, make Rupert Murdoch “look like a socialist”³. Not simply this, but, in a more astute collaborative game, a mix of advertisement outsourcing and enjoyable (or obsessive) compulsiveness towards visibility is activated. Here follows an example of one such collaborative visibility game, which will be familiar to some:

Dear Mr X,

Congratulations on publishing your article in Journal Y. Company Z is committed to promoting and increasing the *visibility* of your article [...] it is important that your article is *visible* where the user starts their search [...] Whilst social media is increasing in importance, there are other options to *draw attention* to your latest work: email your networks or post on listservs and websites about your recent publication, and add your article to your course reading list (if appropriate). Let us know what initiatives you are already using to promote your article. We would love to help you promote any blogs, sites or Twitter feeds you set up by linking to them from our websites, so please do get in touch. Best Wishes, Company Z Marketing Division. [emphases added]

Through such practices, the datascape is crossed by an impressive traffic of logistic movements in which visibility becomes both a crucial resource to mobilize and an aim to attain (never a dimension to be discussed). Many of these visibility games come to rely on a sort of volunteerism that is analogous to the practices Gary T. Marx (2006) has described as ‘soft surveillance’:

While hard forms of control are hardly receding, the soft forms are expanding in a variety of ways. I note several forms of this – requesting volunteers based on appeals to good citizenship or patriotism; using disingenuous communication; profiling based on life style and consumption; and utilizing hidden or low visibility information collection techniques.

We are stirred to take part in visibility games. We constantly engage in visibility games, increasingly in ways that cannot be clearly defined as either coercion or volunteerism – although

³ George Monbiot, “Academic publishers make Murdoch look like a socialist. Academic publishers charge vast fees to access research paid for by us. Down with the knowledge monopoly racketeers”, *The Guardian*, 29 August 2011.

both forms certainly continue to exist. Volunteerism presupposes hegemony and breeds enjoyment, coercion is usually applied in response to dissent and tends to produce pain. These two poles constitute permanent possibilities in the management of the field of visibility, possibilities which can be quickly reached, often through sudden escalation. However, in many everyday contexts the circulation of the visibilities of social sites, subjects, phenomena and events proceeds through the paradigm of reaction: receiving and passing it on. Society is, as well known, largely a phenomenon of receiving and passing on. Nineteenth-century social science scholars who made this discovery were simultaneously attracted and shocked by all sorts of phenomena – contagion, psychic epidemics, somnambulism, imitation – that threatened the liberal cult of the free-willed individual in full possession of himself (gendered language required). Overall, politically speaking (and in terms of a politics of knowledge), today the issue is not to side with either the closed individual or the open flow. Rather, it is crucial to notice the reappearance of an issue of measure(s). Historically, the individual and the capital have been two measures for the social world; but our problem is that they have visibly tended to go astray, and turned into a shapeless out-of-measure. So, today the issue of measure reappears for us as a task of *composition*, and, more precisely, composition of social multiplicities within a shared world through the twin layers of publicity and commonality.

By and large, the game of traceability runs on patented tracks. *Contra* Latour: we think we are computing the individual, but in reality we are feeding the capital. Such a deception can and should be unmasked today. The current economic and social crisis in the West can be turned into something even salutary, if only we are ready to regard it as an occasion for ample questioning about measurements, for *new measures to emerge*. Both epistemologically and ethically, we need to find new measures which are not simply *quantitative* measurements. The *mètron* must be supplemented by the *face*. In my view, this is what territories are all about: not quantities, but the coming together of qualities and properties. Whenever we make territories, we bring certain qualities, certain relations, into an expressive mark, a name, a signature, an *ubi consistam*; we compose: we make art: we create meaning. Society – literally, the fact of being with a *socius*, a colleague, a partner, a friend – begins here: a face-to-face in which we explore the possibility of all measures. This is why undertaking a reflection on territories, as well as a study, a science of territories, calls for attentive scrutiny of how we (do or could) shape certain intensities that characterize our spaces of life, our shared living spaces.

In his famous latest newspaper article *La scomparsa delle lucciole*, Pasolini (1975) diagnosed the disappearance of fire-flies from Italy. Such a disappearance was due, according to Pasolini, to pollution and the degradation of territory brought about by the ruthless modernization of the country. But Pasolini was mostly concerned with the spiritual effects of such a disappearance of fire-flies. Fire-flies (to which, in one of his early poetic works, he compared himself) produce only a very faint light, which is blown away (i.e., becomes invisible) as soon as when we turn on a light bulb. The light of power is a centuplicated industrial blinding light which, like an anti-aircraft floodlight, blows away any other possible light. It freezes one's body; it resembles more the sense of touch than that of sight. The blinding light of power is like the "clutch of power" described by Canetti (1960). Pasolini thought that the small lights of fire-flies had been destroyed by a new type of power, the neo-fascism of capitalism and consumerism. Behind the void of traditional power, Pasolini saw the emergence of a new type of power, which he hinted at as a sinister and mysterious "real power". Pasolini did presciently foresee the novelty of a coming configuration of power: the new power was not ideological, not based on values. And it was thus much more

dreadful, for ideology and values at least leave a margin of maneuver where “the art of not being governed” (Scott 2009) can be exercised. The coming “real power” appeared to Pasolini as a blinding totalitarian light which leaves no shadows: the absolute (in the sense of freed from any context) visibility of spectacle.

So, what is left to invisibility? Irrelevance and exclusion, sure, but also resistance and transformation. The invisible is not the hidden. On the contrary, it is what is “here without being present” (Merleau-Ponty 1964) – that is, what is here but cannot be measured according to existent scales and accepted quantities. And it cannot be measured because, in the first place, *it cannot be named*. The invisible corresponds to what Taussig (1999) has called “public secret”, which lies in open sight but cannot be articulated. From this perspective, the invisible is the deterritorialized, it is a set of qualities without properties. The invisible escapes established measures and it originates the possibility of creating new measures – or, at the very least, of reflecting on our need for measures. The Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn has recently drawn our attention to *crystallization* as a long-term process which unfolds invisibly and carries with it a seed of resistance. At first sight, the crystal might look like a rigid structure, something static and incapable of bringing about change. But crystallization is a process that requires a lot of time and can only happen under a considerable amount of pressure. More crucially still, it is a process that takes place invisibly. An anarchist groups such as the French *comité invisible* (2007: 102-103) has perfectly understood this:

Fuir la visibilité. Tourner l’anonymat en position offensive

[...] N’être socialement rien n’est pas une condition humiliante, la source d’un tragique manque de reconnaissance – être reconnu : par qui ? –, mais au contraire la condition d’une liberté d’action maximale.

The paradox of similar experiences is that, for instance, *comité invisible* have indeed become famous and received extreme press coverage – particularly in connection with the seductive insurrectional *personnage* Julien Coupat – giving way to the script of what was once contemptuously called “recuperation”. Perhaps, visibility arrived too early upon *comité invisible*: the *timing* of visibility is another essential point these thinkers were perfectly conscious of. More recently, they seem to have re-gained the sough-for invisibility and, perhaps, their maximal freedom of action.

In conclusion, I would just like to remark a couple points which, to my mind, could be useful for any attempt to take visibility seriously in social theory and social research. First and foremost, there is no reason why visibility should work according to certain pre-given magnitudes. Such magnitudes, such measures, are, in fact, an epistemological, political and social *stake*. The apparently reasonable postulate that “attention is a scarce resource” (a typical twentieth-century one) is quite deceiving. It is a true postulate only within a specific understanding and a specific configuration of the notion of *attention*, i.e., attention as information, not attention as meaning. Meaning is the intensive, omnipresent but largely unrecognized component of contemporary visibility games. From this point of view, what indexed visibilities make us lose is the complex and unsettled dynamics between qualities and properties. Indexed visibilities tend to produce a *magnificent, reflexive, transparent certainty of the apodictic*. The transparent is one of the highest delusions of our age. Second, consequently, I do not think we need to set for ourselves the task of

developing the type of quantitative social ontology suggested by Latour. Simply because we already have it on the ground, in the shape of indexed visibilities. What we need, instead, is to develop an epistemology that enables us to recognize the coming together of qualities and properties, the emergence of expressions (artists' signatures), i.e. the making of territories in a shared world. Ultimately, this amounts to ask ourselves – as Pasolini first did – what are the actual conditions for the apparition of *a* (new) people.

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