

KARL MARX'S 200TH ANNIVERSARY

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**KARL MARX IN TIME OF VICTORIOUS CAPITALISM:
A REVIEW OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY RESEARCH**

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CAPITALISM: A REVIEW OF NEW AND
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КАРЛ МАРКС В ЭПОХУ ПОБЕДИВШЕГО
КАПИТАЛИЗМА: ОБЗОР НОВЕЙШИХ
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Abstract. This paper is an extended review of selected conferences and other academic events devoted to Marx's 200th anniversary held in 2018. The authors review a collection of the papers presented during these events and reflect on the current position of Marxist and Marxiological scholarship on contemporary campuses in the time of «academic capitalism».

Keywords: marxism, Marx, critical sociology, academic capitalism, comparative capitalism.

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Аннотация. Представлен обзор материалов конференций и научных журналов, посвящённых двухсотлетию со дня рождения Карла Маркса. Авторы анализируют статьи и презентации, которые имеют непосредственное отношение к переосмыслению наследия Маркса в социологии. Статья завершается комментариями о положении марксистских и марксологических исследований в эпоху «академического капитализма».

Ключевые слова: марксизм, Карл Маркс, критическая социология, академический капитализм, сравнительный капитализм

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Capitalism exists in 2018. It can be said that it is a time of victorious capitalism or rather capitalisms. There is a plethora of adjectives different authors have used to characterize the varieties of capitalism. You will see in the literature papers about organized/disorganized capitalism [Lash, Urry, 1987], turbo capitalism [Luttwak, 1998], conscious capitalism [Mackey, Sisodia, 2014], natural capitalism [Hawken, Lovins, Lovins, 1999]. Sociologists also discuss the specifics of academic capitalism [Jessop, 2018b].

The year also 2018 marks the 200th birthday of Karl Marx — a perfect time to reconsider the fate and the prospects of capitalism and the modes of its critique. What Marx left behind is an open system of thought or rather a collection of scattered blocks of theory that allow for creative reconstruction. This means that there are multiple ways of «making sense of Marx», to put it in Jon Elster's words — to construct consistent and compelling readings of Marx.

This paper is not intended as a standard piece of the conference report genre; rather, it is a selective review essay focusing on several particularly interesting results of the sociologists' reflections on Marx's 200th anniversary. In order to avoid the pitfall of being somewhat arbitrary this paper borrows the definition of what is 'interesting' from Murray Davis' famous 1971 paper, in which he argued that «interesting theories are those which *deny* certain assumptions of their audience» [Davis, 1971: 309]. Furthermore, instead of theories, this paper is concerned with professional events and publications devoted to Marx's jubilee that resonated across the sociological community. Specifically, questions that arose during this anniversary year include:

What happened to the Marxian critical project during the last 200 years? Does it still have a future? Has Marx become an indisputable classic, and, by the same token, no longer relevant for sociology's present concerns? Is capitalism still an «unsurpassable horizon of our times», to adopt Jean-Paul Sartre's words (notably, said in relation to Marxism) or just a controversial political term with limited heuristic value? Can the Marxian synthesis of speculative philosophy and political economy add value to the scientific study of the social reality, and what is 'value' anyway?

Many of these questions have been addressed by sociologists in this landmark year, at professional meetings and conferences, as well as in published papers and journals' special issues.

One of the major conferences on Marx in 2018 has undoubtedly been the one organized by *The Marx Collegium*, featuring prominent speakers such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Saskia Sassen, Etienne Balibar, Bob Jessop, Silvia Federici, Bertell Ollman, Leo Panitch, Terell Carver, George Comninel, Marcello Musto and the late Moishe Postone.¹ The other major initiative related to Marx's anniversary is the *Marx200* project funded by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, presenting an extensive archive of digital documents, exhibits, interviews and scholarly presentations, as well as information on the events, such as conferences, summer and autumn schools, and public lectures.² While these two initiatives are perhaps unmatched in their scale and scope, they naturally encompass a wide variety of publics and scholarly disciplines. The concern of this paper, by contrast, is specifically the sociological resonance of Marx's anniversary.

Luckily, a sociological approach to the themes of Marx's 200th anniversary has not escaped the attention of some of the discipline's professional bodies. Thus, the 8.1 issue of *The Global Dialogue*, the official journal of International Sociological Association, devoted a special section to the reflections of sociologists on the fate of Marx and Marxism within the discipline. On the contrary, the American Sociological Association and International Institute of Sociology remained silent.³

The Global Dialogue offers a range of reflections on Marxism's uneven career in sociology, its relationships to feminism, theory of the state, the analysis of law and much else besides, taking stock of the 200 year long survival race between the Marxian critique and its object — capitalism, or bourgeois mode of production. In their short one-page editorial, the editors, Brigitte Aulenbacher and Klaus Doerre [2018], concede approvingly that there is «a rich body of research on Marx worldwide», despite of the fact that Marxian theory remains contested [Aulenbacher, Doerre, 2018: 31]. The invited symposium, entitled 'Marx and Sociology Today', was aimed at providing an appreciation of this diversity and mapping the terms of the contestation.⁴

G. M. Tamás gives a short overview of Marxism's relationships with sociology as a discipline, emphasizing from the outset that the latter «is posterior to» the former

¹ The conference reports are available in several languages from the collegium's website: URL: <http://www.marxcollegium.org/speakers.html> (date of assess: 29.09.2018).

² URL: <https://marx200.org/en/mediathek> (date of assess: 29.09.2018).

³ As for the former, the most recent material mentioning Karl Marx on the ASA website is from January 2017: URL: <http://www.asanet.org/news-events/asa-news/what-relation-between-theory-and-practice-and-did-marx-discuss-engineering-society> (date of assess: 29.09.2018).

⁴ It is impossible to do justice to all the contributions presented within the limits of this paper, so the below review is inevitably selective. Interested readers may refer to the issue itself for more details.

[Tamás, 2018: 32]. Despite the fact that most Marxists would agree with the core premise of a sociological study of capitalism which Tamás traces back to Weber and Mauss, there is a «quarrel» between Marxism and bourgeois sociology, whose project was «in part directed against» Marx's legacy [Ibid.]. From the point of view of the history of philosophy, Marx made a step «forward from Hegel, but also back to Kant» [Ibid.: 33], thus restoring the «duality of the empirical and the transcendental». Furthermore, Marx's critique of sociology's celebrated «facts qua things» (pace Durkheim) as reified abstractions suspects active essences behind static appearances, claiming that the former are «not things, but human subjective activities» [Ibid.]. Hence inequality is not identical to exploitation — to regard the latter a «political problem» capable of gradual improvement is, for a Marxist, absurd [Ibid.]. Moreover, Marx also questions the notion of class struggle as a driving force of history — instead, classes are historical, not trans-historical, and as such exist only in capitalism. If classes are epiphenomenal of value and capital, then class cultures, organizations and lifestyles, like much of the rest of the objects of sociological study, are little more than «second-order epiphenomena». Thus, «usually, sociological questions cannot be answered by Marxian theory, and vice versa» [Ibid.].

In his contribution, Erik O. Wright focuses on the prediction that capitalism is unsustainable as a social order, showing that this proposition «embodies the interplay of deterministic claims about the inevitable demise of capitalism with nondeterministic claims about the future beyond capitalism» [Wright, 2018: 34]. While doubtful about the strength and longevity of capitalism, Wright believes that the nondeterministic element creates a space for collective agency, while the deterministic ones give reasons for optimism. Hence the continuing relevance of Marxism for the social movements, even though «we now live in a world very different from the one in which Marx formulated his theoretical ideas» [Ibid.: 35]. Wright concedes, however, that the «laws of motion» are no longer feasible as an analytical framework in the XXI century. Making a detour from the hardline Marxist worldview, he refers to such 'bourgeois' notions as equality, freedom, democracy and humanity, considered necessary for «human flourishing» which, according to Wright, capitalism fails to produce, thus «obstructing» their «fullest possible realization». For Wright, a desirable post-capitalist future would be based on an economic system where investment and production decisions fall out of control of the capitalist class and are instead governed by means of a radical democracy. This prospect advocates Marxism as not simply a critique of capitalism, but an «emancipatory social science» in charge of analyzing the conditions under which radical economic democracy would be not just imaginable or desirable, but achievable and sustainable. Wright's last thesis pertains to the importance of the «class struggles of transformation» that go beyond mere resistance. This claim speaks directly to his own project of analyzing «real utopias» [Wright, 2010]. Global capital has no «outside»; hence its transformation can only be achieved from the «inside» and only with the help of popular mobilizations [Wright, 2018: 35].

Moving away from purely economic perspective of Marxism, Alexandra Scheele and Stephanie Wöhl [2018] examine how feminism confronts Marxism in the XXI century. Criticizing the current Marx renaissance's blindness towards feminist questions, the contributors try to bring forth the crucial issue of capitalism's entanglement

with patriarchy, noting that «feminist analyses were never genuinely part of left-wing discussions about Marx» [Scheele, Wöhl, 2018: 36]. Whereas Marx «at least mentioned» the gendered dimensions of capitalist reproduction and exploitation, the sexual division of labor, and patriarchal foundations of capitalist accumulation, these issues are remarkably absent from contemporary renewal of the Marxist debate [Ibid.] The authors call attention to the fact that gendered division of labor cannot be taken for granted, since such a naturalization obscures its constitutive role for the functioning of the global capitalist system, as well as the crucial position of reproductive labor within the global production and care chains [Ibid.: 37]. In this respect, Scheele's and Wöhl's contribution speaks not only to the feminist accounts, but also to Marxist feminism emerging from within the tradition and stressing the gendered dimensions of such fundamental processes as «primitive accumulation». The work of the Operaist feminist thinker Silvia Federici [Federici 2004] would be a case in point. The authors' second major point concerns the necessity of engaging with the insights offered by feminist and the postcolonial perspective to recognize the limitation of the Marxian revolutionary subject as a male, white, and Western [Scheele, Wöhl, 2018: 37]. The contribution concludes with a critique of the current androcentric bias in both academia and Marxism at large.

Bob Jessop's contribution concerns the issue of the Marxist analysis of the modern state [Jessop, 2018a]. Starting with the well-known observation that neither Marx nor Engels provided a comprehensive theory of the state and nationalism, as well as the concrete mechanisms of the state's famous «withering away», Jessop asserts that there is still much to be gained from the scattered accounts of these issues that Marx and Engels *did* develop. Jessop suggests that at least three main accounts of the state are discernible in Marx's work [Ibid.: 38]. First, there is the notion of the state as the «central committee of the bourgeoisie», implying complete continuity between the class organizations of the capitalists and the state, and asserting the latter's complete heteronomy. However, this idea is dismissed by Jessop as merely «propagandist» and intended for strategic purposes. The second reading, more informed by historical evidence, posits the state as a *potentially autonomous* entity, and sees the autonomy as a contingent outcome of the class struggle. Such an understanding remains widely accepted in today's historical sociology. The third reading is rooted in Marx's early criticism of Hegel's philosophy of right and the later account of the experience of the Paris Commune. In this account the state reappears as the alienated structure separating the rulers and the ruled; on the other hand, by virtue of its impersonal domination, the state also functions as the condition of possibility of the separation of the political and the economic, and thus political from economic exploitation — the insight famously taken on board by the Political Marxists [Wood, 1981]. Marx also pointed out the inherent contradiction of democratic constitutions — between the formal equality of political rights and the social and economic power of the bourgeoisie that allows it to dominate «subaltern» classes. In the end, Marx does leave some space for the state's autonomy — the crucial issue in the sociology of the state, from the 1970s Marxists «state derivation» debates to the more recent historical sociology of the state [Evans, Rueschmeyer, Skocpol, 1985] — by virtue of the institutional separation of the political and the economic, and the relative autonomy of political struggle from the

immediate economic conditions. Jessop's conclusion is that Marxian analysis of the state, precisely because of its incomplete character, is a promising yet challenging field for further theoretical elaboration.

Guilherme Leite Gonçalves [2018] addresses another problematic part of Marxian theory—the analysis of law. Beginning with the observation that «much of what we know about the Marxist notion of law» is rooted in Pashukanis' «commodity-form theory of law» [Pashukanis, 1978], Gonçalves argues that this theory explains why domination assumes abstract character, how the appropriation of the producer's labor is made invisible, and how exchange between equals sustains inequality; however, it cannot explain why capitalism reduce itself to this cycle [Gonçalves, 2018: 40]. Drawing on the arguments of Rosa Luxemburg, further developed by David Harvey and Klaus Doerre, that capital's global reach and expansion are driven by the necessity to realize value by colonizing some Other, external spaces, not yet commodified, Gonçalves suggests that primitive accumulation is a permanent feature of capitalism—it simply never stops [Bonefeld, 2011; Doerre, 2012]. He then relates the notion of *Landnahme*, proposed by Doerre as a general description of capital's modus operandi, to law. The theory of the legal form by Pashukanis has limited heuristic value as far as *Landnahme* is concerned: in this process «law works as explicit legal violence and an express prescription of inequality» [Gonçalves, 2018: 40—41]. Hence the theory views the role of the state as central in the process of «land grabbing», as the agency that violently destroys the institutions of common property and replaces them with private property relations. First, it engages in the process of «legal othering», the discursive characterization of the non-capitalist 'Other' as deviant and inferior by means of the human rights doctrine. Then the state imposes privatization. Finally, the law simply takes the form of Marxian 'bloody legislation' whereby the criminal law is mobilized to discipline the workforce—in the present context, enforcing precarious and flexible work relations and criminalizing poverty. Gonçalves concludes that the law works differently depending on whether it is being enacted in the cycle of exchange of equivalents or the expansion cycle (*Landnahme*), fluctuating between explicit legal violence in the latter case, and fetishist legal form in the former.

Lastly, the three concluding contributions address the issue of Marxism's prevalence in different parts of the world, namely India, South Africa, and the Global South more generally. Satish Deshpande provides a comprehensive map of Marxism's reception in India, where, contrary to the Anglo-American West, political Marxism has loomed larger than academic [Deshpande, 2018: 42]. India stands out as the first country in which a democratically elected communist government assumed power. This event occurred in 1957 when the Communist Party of India won the elections in the state of Kerala and became the major agent of spreading Marxist ideas. Academically, Marxism in India has been more influential in history, economics and political science rather than sociology, with some notable exceptions. The country's contribution to theoretical Marxism has been primarily in the transition debate and Subaltern Studies [Ibid.: 43].

Michelle Williams [2018], writing from South Africa, argues that Marx remains relevant despite the recent rise of postmodernism. Yet the biggest challenge for the local Marxist scholars is to engage productively with the issues of race and racism after apartheid. Most of the Marxist analyses of race have tended to see it as an instrument

of division of the working class, thus taking the latter's identity for granted. Hence, more nuanced historical accounts sensitive to historical contingency are needed.

Finally, Raju Das and David Fasenfest [2018] look at Marxism from the point of view of the Global South, arguing that Marx's theory remains pertinent to that region, if engaged with carefully—avoiding both Eurocentrism as well as world-regional exceptionalism. Going against much of postcolonial thought, Das and Fasenfest suggest that Marx's analysis focused on Europe as the site where capitalism, as a system, took root, rather than conveyed any sense that European experiences were somehow privileged or unique [Das, Fasenfest, 2018: 46]. Therefore, his «basically global and internationalist» approach remains salient, as long as both the North and South are class societies where «the majority of free and unfree workers perform surplus labor» [Ibid.].

Many of these topics surrounding Marxism's global reach also resonated at the 2018 Hamburg conference entitled «The Dynamics of Capitalism: Inquiries to Marx on the Occasion of his 200th Birthday», jointly organized by Hamburg Institute of Social Research and the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, May 3—5, 2018. Contrary to the ISA's reflections, this conference was less concerned with how Marxism travelled in sociology and instead focused on the topic that preoccupied Marx himself—the capitalist dynamics. Again, it is impossible to do justice to the richness of the presentations; fortunately, they are available online for those interested.⁵

The opening presentation was given by Thomas Piketty who presented some of the findings of his recent research pertaining to the changing patterns of political conflict and rising inequality.⁶ Starting with the question as to why rising inequality does not lead to rising demands for redistribution, Piketty examined the changing voter composition in France, Britain, and the US for the period of 1948—2017 using the data from post-electoral surveys. He found that in the 1950s and 1960s, the vote for the left (labor, social-democrat, socialist) parties used to be associated with lower education and lower income, and hence can be interpreted as a class-based vote intended to press for redistributive policies. Over the 1970s and 1980s, however, the left vote has become associated with higher education and income levels, so that in the 1990s and 2000s, Piketty claims, a new «multiple-elite party system» emerged. This new political system is divided into the highly educated left-wing «Brahmin», and wealthy or high income right-wing «Merchant» voters, or intellectual elite vs. business elite. Piketty's main conclusion is that ongoing evolutions are complex and political strategies will matter in shaping the course of future events. New class alliances and cleavages might emerge, including a renewed class-based political conflict.

Wolfgang Streeck focused specifically on Marx, and his social theory as a theory of history, noting a reemergence of the sense of directionality of historical process after the neoliberal revolution of the late 1970s⁷ (see also [Streeck, 2010]). Delving into Marxian theory of value, as well as the accounts of the struggle around the working day, Streeck argued that over the course of its history, capitalism emancipates itself from the conditions of its emergence. This process is best captured in the chapters of *Das Kapital*

⁵ URL: <http://www.mpiifg.de/projects/marx200/livestreams.asp> (date of assess: 29.09.2018).

⁶ URL: <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/Piketty2018.pdf> (date of assess: 29.09.2018).

⁷ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oYebm07Wa0> (date of assess: 29.09.2018).

devoted to the «formation of the modern working class» that in many ways parallel the concluding chapters of Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, where the metaphor of the iron cage emerges. Perhaps the most interesting part of Streeck's presentation was in his historical observations. Similar to today, in the 1960s and the 1970s the speculation on the possible shape of a post-capitalist future loomed large in the social science discourse, along with the idea of emancipation *from work*, as evidenced by the attention paid to such evocative texts as Keynes' *The Economics Possibilities of Our Grandchildren*.⁸ The implication of Streeck's argument is that, with the advent of neoliberal orthodoxy that revitalized work-discipline and the concern with economic subsistence, Marx's analysis of the «driving forces» of history has become relevant anew.

Jens Beckert addressed the topic of value in Marx and in the new economic sociology⁹. His argument is that parts of the Marxian agenda remain relevant in so far as it focuses on the difference between value and market prices, therefore offering a way to examine the dynamics of capitalism, rather than static equilibrium conditions. However, the divergence between values and prices and hence the sources of capitalist dynamics need not be addressed in exclusively Marxian terms. Beckert suggests an economic-sociological interpretation of the theory of investment expectations as a means to account for these issues, as well as alternative readings of the Marxian theory of value, as suggested by pragmatist interpretations [Deutschmann, 2011].

Axel Honneth represented the discipline of philosophy in the conference dominated by economic sociologists¹⁰. Pointing out from the outset that Marx never abandoned the notion of civil society he borrowed from Hegel, Honneth insisted that for Hegel, and a fortiori for Marx, this concept meant simply the market or the economy, the realm of private exchanges among self-interested individuals—contrary to the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment. Over the course of his studies, Marx fluctuated between offering a structural theory of capitalist dynamics and a critical anthropology of bourgeois subjectivity. This hesitation is best exemplified by the *Grundrisse*, where, according to Honneth, Marx tried to combine the two. The *Grundrisse* also make clear that any notion of 'epistemological rupture' is absurd—Marx never abandoned his project of the critique of alienation, although he did struggle with making theory and data fit as well as with his famous «method of presentation» vs. «method of inquiry» problem. Honneth concluded with the argument that this contradiction—or double purpose—of the Marxian project persists, but can be used productively as a source of alternative conceptualizations of «capitalism»: as an economic system or as a «form of life», that is, culture.

Other presentations were no less salient, ranging from sophisticated analyses of the new roles assumed by technology—Marx's cherished «productive forces»—to the rise of the «artificially intelligent classes» (Marion Fourcade)¹¹ or the «technoscience rent» (Kean Birch)¹². There were also two presentations that addressed the topic of money,

⁸ Keynes J. M. (1930) *The Economic Possibilities of Our Grandchildren*. URL: <http://www.econ.yale.edu/smith/econ116a/keynes1.pdf> (date of assess: 29.09.2018).

⁹ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SibSNPH603M> (date of assess: 29.09.2018).

¹⁰ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BB6epE9YVz0> (date of assess: 29.09.2018).

¹¹ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUNYGdKaw8A> (date of assess: 29.09.2018).

¹² URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_iddHJ1IDM (date of assess: 29.09.2018). See also URL: https://www.academia.edu/33175493/Technoscience_rent_Towards_a_theory_of_rentiership (date of assess: 29.09.2018).

financialization and economic abstractions more generally (Greta Krippner and Aaron Sahr)¹³. New ways of conceptualizing the modes of production, a category notoriously prone to confusion, were offered (David Elder-Vass)¹⁴ along with the reflections on the history of ideas, for example, «the never-ending story» of capitalism's imminent collapse (Friedrich Lenger)¹⁵.

As evidenced by this unjustifiably short overview, some of the ever present tensions of Marxism reemerged throughout the papers presented in *The Global Dialogue*, as well as in the presentations of the Hamburg conference. The issues of incompatibility of the Marxian analysis of the value-form with the standards of mainstream empirical social science [Postone, 1993], the challenge of developing an adequate theory of the state and the law, as well as accounting for the non-European and gendered dimensions of capital and capitalism remain as salient as always. Furthermore, if, as many of the authors suggest, political practice cannot be used as a criterion — if not for verification, then for vindication — of the central claims of Marxism, perhaps the scholars who consider themselves as belonging to this tradition should come up with some other criteria for distinguishing between «good» and «bad» Marxist scholarship. With this it is also important to consider how possible criteria would be compatible with the established epistemologies of the mainstream social sciences? Finally, there is the concern of what remains of Marxism as a unified research program — can it bring any value to the feminist or postcolonial studies, or historical sociology of the state, or economic sociology of value and markets, so that the exchange will be reciprocal, rather than one-sidedly oriented at correcting the blind spots of Marxism? Or rather, as Immanuel Wallerstein [Wallerstein, 1998] and Randall Collins [Collins, 1994] suggest, can Marxism now be regarded as a fundamental basis of any sociological inquiry, thereby paradoxically becoming increasingly distant from the specific concerns of the practicing researchers? If «we are all now Marxists» by virtue of doing sociology, what would be distinctive of a *Marxist sociology*? Should we blame the «academization of Marxism» ongoing since the 1960s [Ollman, 1982] especially in the current times of «academic capitalism»? These questions seem to remain on the agenda, and the sociologists' current engagement with Marx are but a compelling indication of their continuing salience.

We would like to conclude this essay by offering a speculation about what Marx could possibly bring to the global, international and comparative sociology of the XXI century. William Sewell has aptly characterized contemporary comparative historical sociology as predominantly «left Weberian» [Sewell, 1996]. Weberian analysis proceeds with the assumption of multiple divergent trajectories, following the basic logic of the case-based comparative research. Hence what we now have is an endless debate about varieties of capitalism, or varieties of transitions to capitalism. There is nothing wrong with this research program; however, its heuristic potential may be limited by the very assumption it is based on — the assumption of difference. Yet what a renewed attention to Marx can bring is precisely a certain re-focusing of our theorizing on what

¹³ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4GXJBUvUc4> (date of assess: 29.09.2018).

¹⁴ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUNYGdKaw8A> (date of assess: 29.09.2018).

¹⁵ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8usobQUqBo> (date of assess: 29.09.2018).

might be called, following Wolfgang Streeck, the «commonalities of capitalism» [Streeck, 2010], with a focus on categorical core that remains beyond the institutional and technological forms capitalist societies nowadays assume. The reviewed papers and presentations covered in this article demonstrate both the demand for such a vision and serve as promising attempts to elaborate some conceptual tools for it.

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