Matters of Social Epistemology: A Comment on Emma Stamm's Review

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Ironically, as an academician, there are countless reasons why I don't successfully engage in academic book reading. Undergraduate classes to prepare and teach, field notebooks to transcribe in NVivo software, languishing joint publication projects, obscure workshops, and, in my case (not isolated alas), time—and life—consuming efforts to try to continue, somehow and perhaps in vain, to make academic research and teaching my profession: almost everything encourages me to just quickly browse standardized papers looking for things I already know and further convince myself of them (I am hardly exaggerating). Not to mention all the entertainment, distractions, and more or less political involvements to fight against—or, for a moment, take a break from—these gloomy and uncertain times. And without mentioning the time devoted to the people I love and who keep me going.[1]

It may be sad. But it may also be understandable. The book's cover might be classy, but then reading it… Let's remember what it implies: for it (the book), it is about short-circuiting the growing, legitimate, and seducing call of countless stimuli, escapes, salvations, and parasites. Sit down and read me. Asking an academician constantly drowning into the continuous stream of the accelerated world to put their (often precarious) life in parenthesis, to sit alone for about ten hours without any other stimulation than that of unpoetic sentences printed on low quality paper and to be in a purely bilateral relationship with an obscure author blathering on a topic of social science: this is asking a lot.

And most of the time, for me at least, it is asking too much. No matter how hard I try, nothing happens, and the surrounding world ends up taking over. The book closes (or, rather, falls out of my sleeping hands, tossed by a snore) and is soon put in a stack or, if lucky enough, in a library. Will it ever be reopened? Maybe. But nothing is less certain. This unread book is good as new; let it remain so, and work as decoration (many full professors' offices are decorated with these gleaming, and more and more expensive, trinkets).

Sometimes, however, something happens. And it is certainly this hope that pushes me to try academic book reading again and again; whenever *it* happens, everything resonates. I believe we all have such memories. Personally, I will always remember my first encounter with Marx's *Capital*:[2] a book that was so austere in appearance turned out to be, in fact, a police investigation into the disappearance of surplus value. Mind blowing (especially volume 1)! The same, several years later, with *Laboratory Life* by Latour and Woolgar.[3] While I was educated in Bourdieusian austerity, this book was a burst of freshness. The ball of inscriptions; the carnival of immutable mobiles! Impossible to stop, or even blink.[4]

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[1] Having observed the often-uneasy stammering reactions of my colleagues to the question "what's the last social science book you've read from cover to cover?", I have reasons to believe that I am not the only one to be confronted with this few-academic-book-reading phenomenon.

[2] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1.* (Seattle, WA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010 [1867]).

[3] Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life—The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992 [1979]).

[4] This often happens when I read *real* books, i.e. those written by poets and novelists

These social science book-related feelings of joy are not uncommon. But they are clearly in the minority. And this minority; these true encounters; these dispensers of fantastic worlds will also end up in a pile or a library, for sure, but all scratched, scribbled, annotated, twisted. They will not be trinkets, but genuine working tools. Real academic books, in short, which deploy their long panoply of resistance, notably to sand, ashes, and coffee.

I don't know if my book, *The Constitution of Algorithms*, manages to generate all this (I doubt it).[5] But Emma Stamm's review makes me hope that a quantum of this phenomenon has indeed happened, at least once, to one person. [6,7] And I like to imagine the book all battered up, now a real working document. And it is a great feeling of joy.

I will not discuss the content of Stamm's review here: I agree with almost everything that she wrote, and do not wish to police interpretations anyway. Rather, I will explore two propositions of Stamm that I find particularly interesting and that I believe are not directly in the book (but I could be wrong). The first one is the connection she makes between books and algorithms, which may deserve further consideration. The second concerns what Stamm calls "glowing curiosity," which appears to me a very condition of social and critical analysis.

Books as Algorithms (kind of)

In the book's introduction, where I present the axioms of my analytical approach, I argue that inscriptions are crucial actants (non-human actors) for the generation of the on-going world. Indeed, the argument goes, due to their ability to often live beyond the here and now of their instantiation (durability), to be moved more or less easily from one place to another (mobility), and—pending suitable scriptural infrastructures—to host some aspects of other actants and present them again (re-presentability), inscriptions contribute *a lot* to what is constantly happening (12-14).

From there, books—as specific collections of inscriptions—also participate in the generation of the collective world, what perfectly showed masterly works of, for example, Elizabeth Eisenstein and Dorothy Smith.[8] Inscriptions—as durable, mobile and re-presentable marks—may have preceded books by several millennia, but the circulation of the book form as made possible by the typographic technologies of the sixteenth century has redrawn the contours of the West at first, and of the world later (alas). And even today, the book form, which sometimes seems outdated, continues to produce important effects, if only for the

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[5] Florian Jaton, *The Constitution of Algorithms: Ground-Truthing, Programming, Formulating* (Cambrdige, MA: The MIT Press, 2021).

[6] Emma Stamm, "Salience Machines: A Review of Florian Jaton's *The Constitution of Algorithms: Ground-Truthing, Programming, Formulating.*" *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, 2021.

[7] Or maybe two. See this other review, in French: Olivier Alexandre, "L'assemblée des Algorithmes." *La Vie des Idées*, 2021.

[8] Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005 [1992]) ; Dorothy E Smith, "The Social Construction of Documentary Reality," *Sociological Inquiry*, 1974.

media hype that their promotion sometimes generates.[9] In that sense, using Stamm's terminology, books are *salience machines*.

What about algorithms? They too are collections of inscriptions that can take several forms: mathematics in their academic presentation, lines of code in their implemented version, or even pseudo-code (a mix between logics, mathematics and programming symbols) on certain occasions of communication. These different, and complementary, forms are sometimes gathered in collections, modules, and ubiquitous computer systems which strongly participate in the generation of the collective world. At the time of generalized mobile computing, it is a truism to stress the weight of these other salience machines, central components of our *algorithmic lives*.[10]

But this truism might be of importance, as it allows to underline that algorithms nowadays certainly go further than books in the generation of the collective world. By being operative, algorithms are content *and* interpretation, this typically enabling them to interact with more inscriptions than books. As soon as a set of inscriptions comes in (input), other inscriptions take care of the actual computation (processing) in order to generate new sets of inscriptions (output), themselves capable of constituting the inputs of further algorithmic processes. As Hartmut Rosa suggested—albeit in hollow—social acceleration is today carried by an avalanche of inscriptions, to which algorithms—even more than books—strongly contribute.[11]

In short, books and algorithms are scriptural productions that both contribute to generating the collective world, but the operative quality of algorithms undoubtedly gives them—in our times of generalized mobile computing—a greater generative power than books. Here may lie an important difference of intensity, rather than nature.

Inquiry as Adventure

I was touched to see that Stamm found the general tone of the book quite cheerful. Though often critical toward algorithms (and those who construct them), she describes the mood as "passionate and reverent."[12] More than a compliment, this may connect with the more general question of the link between inquiry and excitement. How to insert oneself in the folds of a phenomenon if one is not positively fascinated by it? Or put shorter: Can critique do without passion?

Earlier in this note, I mentioned my first encounter with Marx's *Capital*. There is no doubt, when reading it, that Marx is both extremely critical of capitalism and positively fascinated by it. Is he? Yes, because for Marx, as we all know, capitalism is the surest way to achieve

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[9] Current French political turmoil may remind us of that.

[10] Massimo Mazzotti, "Algorithmic Life," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2017.

[11] Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration—A New Theory of Modernity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015 [2010]).

[12] Emma Stamm. "Salience Machines: A Review of Florian Jaton's *The Constitution of Algorithms: Ground-Truthing, Programming, Formulating.*" *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 10 (9): 1-6, 2021, page 6.

communist revolution. In this sense, Marx is quite enthusiastic about the historical formation that is capitalism because its inner contradictions—which he thoroughly describes—contain potential revolutionary grips. The *Capital* is thus a critical analysis that is meant to be rigorous and dialectical—in the wake of Hegel (of whom Marx remains a disciple)—but which, because of its subject and stakes, is also wrapped in drama from start to finish.

The same is true, I believe, of Marx's relationship with the bourgeoisie. Even if Marx is often rough with this historical formation, he is also passionate and even, in some passages, reverent. The reason is simple: the proletariat must, and will, overthrow the bourgeoisie, but the bourgeoisie itself is thought of as a real progress in relation to the past, notably feudal and tyrannical. And far from being a mere stylistic addition, this reverence serves as fuel for his analysis: in order to criticize the bourgeoisie—and even eradicate it—Marx takes it seriously, which implies respecting it (temporarily at least).

It is thus possible that a passionate mood is not an accessory element that would come in addition, like a cherry on a cake, but one of the conditions to critical depth. Let's take now the case of *Laboratory Life*, the second example mentioned in this note's introduction. There is no doubt, when reading the book, that Latour and Woolgar are both curious and enthusiastic about the regime of scientific enunciation: It is only by being fascinated that one can stay two whole years in a community of practice without becoming depressed (or, simply, mad). However, and in the same movement, Latour and Woolgar also make an eminently critical gesture: science is not, and has never been, what scientists (including philosophers) say it is. Almost three centuries of discourse on science (*epistemo-logy*) become erroneous: thunder in the night! Passion and enthusiasm had better be part of this descriptive adventure: the critical weight of their argument requires both.

Adventure: this may be the crucial word. Let critical academic books be adventure books; this can only make them more readable, to me at least. And as inscriptions make worlds when read, this is a matter of social epistemology, quite topical indeed.

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