

The colored democracy of Edi Rama: Art and Beauty as Forms of Political Action

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Can art and beauty be the starting point for a process of urban regeneration and construction of a collective identity, lost in sad historical and political events? Edi Rama thinks so. Rama, first an artist, second the mayor of Tirana and last the Prime Minister of Albania, chose the color, art and beauty as devices to renew the hope among his people and he was right.

Through this policy of the arts Edi Rama has been able to give new life to Tirana: citizens, surrounded by beauty, feel now safer and they have found their civic identity as well as they have developed a strong sense of belonging to the urban community. This issue does not involve installations of commemorative monuments in public areas of the city, but it concerns instead a wise use of color to bring life to the buildings and it aims to a total rethinking of the city spaces.

The Edi Rama's motto is "take back your city with paint", because, he says, the color is not only art, but a form of political action. These interventions, Rama says, "do not have children fed, cared for the sick or instructed the uneducated," but give hope and light, help people to understand that it can be possible to live in a different way.

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Now we have many problems to solve in the city, but we have a city. And this has been the beginning of it through just this very simple change of the mindset by putting some color in the middle of nowhere.

Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania, 2009

"I am a realist who dream". In this way Edi Rama defines himself. I think it is necessary, before speaking about the use of art and beauty as forms of political action, to introduce you who Edi Rama is and what is his idea of political action.

Actually Edi Rama is the Prime Minister of Albania. Previously he became the minister of culture in 1998 and after that mayor of Tirana. "I entered politics from a completely different background from other people in this field, and that has helped me to see and deal with things differently", Rama said in an interview with World Investment News in 2009. But what was the background Edi Rama comes from? During a public speech on May 2012 in Thessaloniki, Greece, Edi Rama said:

"In my previous life I was an artist. I still paint. I love art. I love the joy that color can give to our lives and our communities, and I try to bring something of the artist in me in my politics [...] We faced many challenges. Art was part of the answer, and my name, in the very beginning, was linked with two things: demolition of illegal constructions in order to get public space back, and use of colors in order to revive the hope that had been lost in my city".

He was a good painter, not a great one. Rama had come to Paris in 1995 thanks to a two years fellowship to the Cité Internationale des Arts. He had fallen in love with Picasso and then with Mark Rothko, Francis Bacon and Max Ernst. He had worked as a painter as well as an arts professor before becoming the minister of culture in 1998. As evidence of his use of art and culture as a form of political action we can consider his first intervention as a minister. He underwrote a movie theatre for Tirana, telling his colleagues that in terms of public morale and safety "a dark theatre with good movie is more effective than an unlit street with a thousand police"¹.

"My identity as an artist is part of myself – Rama said in a published interview - It accompanied me as Minister of Culture, then as mayor of Tirana and accompany me as prime minister"².

Edi Rama comes from one of those families that still live in Tirana after that fifteen years ago more than seven hundred thousand of people came to live in and around the city. Rama's father, Kristaq, had studied art in Leningrad and his mother, Aneta, was one of the country's first women dentists. His younger brother, Olsi, now lives in Detroit and is part of a research team at Karmanos Cancer Institute. Rama was born in Albania and at eighteen entered the Albanian Academy of Arts, a place where "painting stopped at Courbet", Edi Rama said. He managed to graduate from the Arts Academy in 1986 and even to be asked to stay on as an assistant professor. He started lecturing on Bauhaus principles and he loved expressionism. He introduced Albania to expressionism, taking a party commission for a forty-foot mural at a museum built by a painter named Vladimir Myrtezai.

Although he joined the cabinet of the Socialist Party government in 1998, he ran as an independent candidate in Tirana's mayoral race in 2000 and he won with a 54% majority. He also won the 2003 election with almost 59% of the votes and in 2007 began a four year term as mayor.

If we would like to understand what the Edi Rama's political action really has been and nowadays is, it is necessary to describe the socio-economic condition of Albania and Tirana before the Rama's victory in mayoral race in 2000. After Albania's transition to democratic government in 1992 Albanians embraced democracy. Tirana suffered from the loss of public green areas. During the transition period, open spaces, boulevards, city parks, green spaces and public plazas

were totally occupied by kiosks of all sort, loosing their original character as a result of the lack of control and construction policy of the public sector.

Because of the extreme isolation under the Marxist-Leninist dictator Enver Hoxha, Albanians developed a strange way to accept democracy. It was closer to the anarchy than democracy: they perceived democracy as the freedom to do something wherever, however and whenever they want. During 1990's hundreds of thousands of migrants streamed into the city of Tirana and as soon as you can't image illegally constructed buildings popped up all around the city.

“What characterizes Tirana in the post-socialist time is an extreme degradation in the quality of urban environments and the occupation of lands by illegal developments, a process that is accompanied by serious harms to environments”³,

Aliaj, Lulo and Myftiu say in the book *Tirana. The Challenge of Urban Development*.

There were a lot of problems in the city; they were evident but the solutions were not. All these conditions, however, have been a great opportunity for Rama's ideas. In the same years three factors contributed to the developments of Edi Rama's political actions: first, the national government decided to decentralize power in the first years that Rama was mayor; second, from 2000 to 2005, when the Socialist Party was in power, Rama enjoyed the support of the national government; third, the country's reforms in the wake of an economic and political crisis also affected the city of Tirana.

But conditions changed for Edi Rama when the Democracy Party won the 2005 national elections. After these elections the government rolled back decentralizations efforts and asserts its authority in the capital. In these same years the population of Tirana grew from a quarter million in the early 1990s to three-quarters of a million at the end of the decade. As the population grew, Tirana's government failed to maintain its infrastructures and the quality of services declined: a 2008 report by United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization concluded, for example, that the volume of waste production in the city doubled during the 1990s⁴. Illegal construction became a serious problem. Half of the city's buildings was built between 1991 and 2001 and most of these did not conform to the city's building code.

The Socialist party supported Edi Rama for mayor in 2000 betting that his youth, dynamism and lack of political baggage would give the party a fresh start in the public's mind: Rama's goal was to transform Tirana into a modern European Capital. “We wanted to compare ourselves with the best practices of well developed countries”⁵, said the city's deputy mayor, Eduard Shalsi.

When Edi Rama became the mayor of Tirana he was thirty-six years old and the first thing he did was to order paint. In Tirana, the line between art and politics is a fine one. Starting from his background as an artist, he decided to transform the city and its buildings by painting in bright colors the old communist buildings and demolishing every illegally constructed buildings in the city.

This process is defined as follow by the Human Development Report Researches:

“the first demolition began rather as an attempt by the state authorities to demonstrate their resolution in the matter. They started from places in Tirana where there was a great concentration of illegal buildings. The demolition work was welcomed by the population. Encouraged by this, the central and local government authorities in the main towns of country instigated a mass campaign for the demolition of these illegal constructions”⁶.

“When we painted the first building – Rama said during a public speech – by splashing a radiant orange on the somber gray of a facade, something unimaginable happened. There was a traffic jam and a crowd of people gathered as if it were the location of some spectacular accident, or the sudden sighting of a visiting pop star”.

He renewed the facades of Tirana's gray Stalinist apartment blocks with color turning them into a kind of neoplastic or abstract artwork using blues, greens, oranges, purples, yellows and reds. A renovation process had earlier involved several governmental buildings in the centre of the city, all of architectural value representing a landmark of rational architecture in Tirana. All buildings were built by Italian architects in the 30s but their facades had degraded after long years of forgetfulness or sporadic renovation of a “free style”, totally disconnected to the original colours of the buildings.

“The colors – Edi Rama said – had the function of transforming the city from the labyrinthine nightmare it was, into a place with a certain harmony among buildings, where you could understand where you were”. As Norman Foster argues the color adds visual distinction to a project. Foster highlights the mediating space of color in relating a building to its environment. The use of color is not so much about the agency of creators or users in a building, but rather how it speaks to its surroundings. An aesthetic as much as a political act, the practice concludes that the primary motivation in choosing color is “the visual excitement of the juxtaposition of vivid colors and their effect on an object in the landscape”⁷.

So Edi Rama began his politic actions using the art and focusing on the rehabilitation and the and the regeneration of public spaces. He was convinced that

“the rehabilitation of public spaces revived the feeling of belonging of a city that people lost. The pride of people about their own place of living, and there were feelings that had been buried deep for years under the fury of illegal, barbaric constructions that sprang up in the public space. And when colors came out everywhere, a mood of chance started trasforming the spirit of people”.

The idea was to make a public space that people are proud of and connect with a sense of ownership “to build a sense

of belonging to the space that is in between my house and the other's house"⁸.

Rama, in 2009, speaking at the Tate Modern during the Architecture Foundation's *Architecture + Art : Crossover and Collaboration* series, noted the following:

"but in the beginning, this is very important, it was not an artistic operation. It was just a way to get through this terrible and very very thick wall between people and authority, and individual life and social life. It's important to give the people a sense of belonging to space. A sense that they [had] lost. Communism used so inflationarily [sic] all the key words of a common life: belonging to the country, belonging to your land, solidarity, volunteering—all these words lost sense in Albania. Using these words at this time sounded totally Communist. So the colors helped to build a common ground for discussion. And then we started to talk to people to build small communities"⁹.

For all these reasons Edi Rama called this project Return to Identity and the act of coloring buildings was the first political action "to communicate with people, to set up a bridge between the people and local authority, so when colours started to appear, people were shocked", Rama said in a published interview¹⁰.

According to Loukas Triantis in the Urban Change and the production of space the process of new identity is explained as:

"the three first stages of urban renewal were promoted under the name 'Return to Identity'. The ideological base of the project was not particularly clear. It was rather a motto that referred at the same time to the past, the present and the future. It simultaneously meant the refurbishment of the interwar buildings, the coloring of some socialist housing and the restitution of open green spaces. By claiming that the identity of Tirana was lost during the chaotic transitional period, urban renewal was in fact referring to the past and some sort of collective memory, as well as to the future and the city's orientation"¹¹.

After initially designing some of the drawings himself, in 2001, in association with Giancarlo Politi of Flash Art magazine, Edi Rama and the city of Tirana organized a biannual art show in which some artists from all around the world painted buildings on a single road. He also invited local students and children to participate in the city's visual face-lift. In 2003, the second Tirana Biennale was held in the city, representing works by more than 120 artists from all over the world and collaborating with a number of international curators. It was inevitable that the painted city would catch the attention of the invited collaborators. Thus, an entire section of the Biennial, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and the Albanian artist Anri Sala, was dedicated to the continuation of the façade treatment project. As a result, proposals by the following artists: Olafur Eliasson, Dominique Gonzalez Foerster, Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija, were realized in some of the facades.

It very interesting the fact that not everyone agreed with the Edi Rama's idea and his color choices and from that a public debate derived. There is nothing better than a public debate for the development of civic involvement. To better understand what the people think about this kind of political action, Edi Rama said

"we made a poll, the most fascinating poll I've seen in my life. We asked people, 'Do you want this action, and to have buildings painted like that?' and the second question was 'Do you want it to stop or do you want it to continue?'. To the first question, 63% of people said yes, we like it. 37% said no, we don't like it. But to the second question, half of them that didn't like it, they wanted it to continue".

And so Edi Rama goes on and geometric patterns, polka dots and giant trees started appearing on the wall of city's buildings. Today the city looks completely different from the one left by Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha two decades ago.

Rama's next step was to demolish illegal constructions and restore the city's public spaces. The data are impressive: Edi Rama removed 123.000 tons of concrete only from the riverbanks and demolished more than 5000 illegal buildings all over the city. The cement was replaced by green: 55.000 trees and bushes were planted in the street and in the square. Park benches in a range of bright primary colors lined the sidewalks. According to Edi Rama it was important that the city turned the reclaimed space into a quality environment:

"our winning card – Rama said – was the support of most citizens. Of course, people did not come out into the streets to help push the bulldozers, but their pressure, expressed through the general enthusiasm reflected in the media, made the resistance of the illegal builders very marginal and weak"¹².

The Rama's administration established a green tax, a contribute of five american dollars to pay the city to plant tree and everybody accepted it and all businessmen paid it regularly. It would be a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk* as Hans Ulrich Obrist said; a project close to the Beuysian social sculpture at an unprecedented scale. It reminded of Beuys's slogan for his *7000 Oaks* [1982–87]: City forestation instead of city administration¹³.

The art and the beauty were changing the mindset of people; everything looked beautiful and safe. There is a story that Edi Rama always tells about that. I quote his words:

"one day I remember walking along a street that had just been colored, and where we were in the process of planting trees, when I saw a shopkeeper and his wife putting a glass facade to their shop. They had thrown the old shutter in the garbage collection place. 'Why did you throw away the shutter?' I asked him. 'Well, because the street is safer now', they answered. 'Safer? Why? They have posted more policemen here?' 'Come on man! What policemen? You can see it for yourself. There are colors, streetlights, new pavement with no potholes, trees. So it's beautiful; it's safe'".

It was clear that it was beauty that was giving people this feeling of being protected. Beauty is much more intimidating than brutality. This phenomena that happened in Tirana is described by Rossi in his book *Architecture of the City* in which he defined architecture and landscape as inseparable from life and society. People create them with an intention of aesthetic and the creation of better surrounding for life¹⁴.

At the end of 2002 Edi Rama passed to another step: he turned his attention to the Lana River developing broad boulevards on either side of the river and planting grass and trees along them. Thanks to his political actions, in 2004 Edi Rama won the title of World Mayor in an online competition in which voters judged his work against the mayors of London, Rome, Mexico City and other major cities and he was chosen by Time magazine to be one of the 2005 European Heroes.

From that moment on it was evident that the beauty could help people to feel safe and could contribute to regenerate and restore the public space. In 2006 Edi Rama and his municipal officials decided to resolve the problem of garbage collection. They analyzed how much it would cost to conduct garbage and trash collection twice a day and to clean roads twice a day. After that Edi Rama asked if people would pay a higher fee for trash collection. Almost 70% said that they would pay more. This is the proof that a beautiful environment could be able to rebuild a strong sense of belonging and that the people could pay more whether the results were like those.

“People – said Rama – started to drop less litter in the street, for example, started to pay taxes, started to feel something they had forgotten, and beauty was acting as a guardasman where municipal police, or the state itself, were missing”.

Edi Rama has been able to change the tax collection procedures and this has been a fundamental step to move ahead with reforms. Starting from 2005, 70% of Tirana municipality’s budget came from local taxes with the remainder coming from the central government.

All of the Edi Rama’s reforms started from the assumption that if he wanted to rebuild Tirana, he needed private investment in public project, which means a sort of working partnership with the developers. A large part of the funds required derived from the World Bank’s help, from the Council of Europe Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Another step of Edi Rama’s programm was the redesign of Tirana city center. The winning design of the master plan for Tirana came from the French firm Architecture Studio in 2003 and they presented a very interesting project of urban regeneration that included the construction of skyscraper: the jury liked the plan for its drama; the urbanist liked it for its density; the developers liked it for the shopping spaces reserved for the tower’s lower floors.

In Tirana Municipality official web-site it is possible to read some informations about this project:

“the enhancement of the historical heritage, the creation of a quality architectural and contemporary urban heritage, the structuring and beautification of public spaces, the creation of planted promenades and gardens, the improvement of dwellings and neighborhood life, the development and modernization of the road network, the development of a tailored public transportation policy, the creation of pedestrian spaces and underground parking, plans for the future extensive of the city, the reconciliation of the city with its environment: these are a few of the project’s major stakes”¹⁵.

The project aims to improve the quality of life of every young citizen providing for the creation of small public spaces within individual districts to provide a safe space in which new generations could grow up without the dangers of the streets.

After a long time the public space of Tirana started assuming a proper individuality, strong and unique connotations with which citizens can identify themselves. In doing this the mayor persisted on the fundamental role that architecture could have not simply for the city, but rather for the “democracy, the culture and the future of Albania”¹⁶.

Nowadays the cheerful painted buildings are one of the main features of the towns, something which makes this place unique. People have started using the public spaces amazed by the new environment and supported by the new illumination program. People enjoy Tirana now.

“People can say that my color is only makeup – Rama says – but suppose all makeup disappeared. Suppose all women had no makeup, no pretty dresses, no pretty hair. These are not Parisians. They can be calmed by beauty”¹⁷. So the architecture wears a symbolic and politic function: the public spaces of the city are not only objects of artistic experimentation but also contribute to the creation of a new way of doing politics. The project was articulated as a sign to show the citizens that the communist times were over and that people needed to eradicate the communist mentality and work together to develop modern Albania. At the same time, Edi Rama described it as the beginning of the reinstating of a sense of public space.

Tirana’s new image was accompanied by a large gentrification process. Although gentrification seems to have been the main objective for Edi Rama, it is important to note that this was achieved through the simple use of paint. Tirana reflects Neil Smith’s assertion that gentrification became a hallmark of the emerging global city¹⁸; new productive worlds – says Jane M. Jacobs – were carved out of unproductive old ones¹⁹.

Today Tirana is an open source to contemporary art, offering an unprecedented interaction between artists and public, attracting an ever growing number of visitors and tourists. There is nothing special about the paintings of buildings, but the effect is surprising. Edi Rama turned these buildings into something attractive. Most of the people in Tirana are happy with them; it was the only option for a city so such little money.

Painting the buildings doesn’t mean that the living conditions inside them have changed; these interventions, Rama says, “do not have children fed, cared for the sick or instructed the uneducated”, but give hope and light, help people to understand that it can be possible to live in a different way. These dynamics should be a starting point in every cities all around the world that decide to use creativity, culture, and the arts in transforming themselves and nations. This

kind of urban renewal was presented to have a pedagogical character that could change the everyday life and the behaviour of the urban dwellers. It is also important to highlight that urban renewal in Tirana was an attempt to introduce the city into a global politico-economic network, through attracting foreign investments. Thus it was necessary for the foreign investors to perceive the city as secure and appropriate for their investments. Urban renewal was instrumental for the city's promotion. Sluis and Wassenberg spoke with enthusiasm of a "genuine metamorphosis"²⁰ that succeeded urban renewal, whereas in 2006 the Unit for Economic Development of Tirana was presenting the city as "ideal for investors who wanted to relocate their businesses, due to "remarkable structural changes"²¹.

Edi Rama was an artist; Edi Rama is the prime minister of Albania and he use art as politic action and paint as tool of change; his motto is "take back your city with paint": paint was used as a tool to bring colour back to the city, both literally and metaphorically. I think it is possible to argue that he is an artist who took Tirana for his canvas.

This case show us that art, supported by community engagement and design participation, can strengthen connections within communities and boost the identity of neglected places. Edi Rama is the proof that is possible to combine art and policy. According to him

"going from art to politics it's impossible, it's Kafka, it's like changing sex. But I wanted to leave my name in the history of this city, this country. On the day of his funeral, my father gave me his most important lesson. I saw the crowd and I saw the respect they paid him. I saw nothing is as valuable as leaving a good history behind you. I went to his grave and made a promise"²².

I think that today it is possible to say Edi Rama keeps his word. He would like to win the death because, as he says in a published interview at Le Courier des Balkans: "I have a problem with death. This because I am an artist. I have a problem with death, and with history. I want to leave a name. I do not care of the rest, I do policy to fight the idea of death"²³. According to Mayor Rama himself, one basic motivation behind urban renewal was personal: "for me Tirana is a mirror, an affirmation, a confirmation of my vision, or call it my will, or my person. This is something that comes far away, like destiny"²⁴.

In a dialogue of Hans Ulrich Obrist and Edi Rama, published on Artforum, the curator ask him if it could be possible to extend the project on the scale of a country. Edi Rama answered:

"we will go forward with the demolition of illegal buildings, with developing an economic plan, but we need visual change too. So there are, for example, beautiful villages on the Ionian coast where we could try to build a synthesis between old houses and new ones. The idea wouldn't be to simply repaint them, as we did in Tirana, but perhaps to differentiate the new from the old, while still producing a coherence. And color is not necessarily the only answer. Maybe live events and performances would produce new traditions, artistic rituals that leave behind traces and forms that will eventually reconfigure those spaces. I'm actually going to visit the southern coast soon, with a few artist friends previously involved with the facade project in Tirana, so that we can debate whether and how existing ideas would apply on a countrywide scale and discuss new approaches"²⁵.

Everything done by Edi Rama gives chance and hope because, as he says,

"when people say nothing can change, just stop and think what the world was like ten, twenty, fifty, one hundred years ago. Our world is defined by the pace of change. We can all change the world. I gave you a very small example of how one thing, the use of color, can make change happen. I want to make more changes as Prime Minister of my country, but every single one of you can make change happen if you want to".

¹ Jane Kramer, "Painting the Town", *The New Yorker*, June 27, 2005, 60.

² "Il viola è il mio colore della pace", Paolo Conti, accessed 20 February, 2014, <http://lettura.corriere.it/il-viola-e-il-mio-colore-della-pace/>

³ Besnik Aliaj, Keida Lulo and Genç Myftiu, *Tirana. The Challenge of Urban Development*, (Slovenia: Gorenjskitisk, 2003), 67.

⁴ Verçuni Arben and Edvin Zhllima, *The food supply and distribution system of Tirana, Albania*, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2008, 11

⁵ Tumi Makgetla, "A New Face for a Tired City: Edi Rama and Tirana, Albania, 2000-2010", *Innovations for Successful Societies*, Princeton University, accessed February 20, 2014, <http://www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties>.

⁶ UNDP, *Human Development Report: Challenges of Local Governance and Regional Development*, (Tirana: UNDP, 2002), 86.

⁷ Foster Associates, "On the Use of Colour in Buildings", in *Colour for Architecture*, eds. Tom Porter and Byron Mikellides (London: Studio Vista, 1976), 62.

⁸ "Edi Rama, Mayor of Tirana", Nick Swift, accessed February 20, 2014, http://www.worldmayor.com/worldmayor_2004/rama_winner04.html.

⁹ Edi Rama, Mayor of Tirana, Albania speaking at the Tate Modern as part of the Architecture Foundation's *Architecture + Art : Crossover and Collaboration* series, 19 October 2009

¹⁰ "Albania Mayor - Edi Rama", Evan Williams, accessed February 20, 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2006/s1647505.htm>

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¹² "Edi Rama replies to questions from an international audience", accessed February 20, 2014, http://www.worldmayor.com/worldmayor_2004/interview_rama.html.

¹³ "Elected Affinities. Hans Ulrich Obrist talks with Edi Rama and Anri Sala", accessed February 20, 2014,

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¹⁴ Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, (London: MIT Press, 1992).

¹⁵ "Tirana City Master Plan", accessed February 20, 2014, <http://tirana.gov.al/repository/docs/master%20plan.pdf>.

¹⁶ Edi Rama, "A vision beyond planning, interview in Declerck", in *Tirana Metropolis*, eds. Joachim Merlort, Elia Zenghelis, Pier Vittorio Aureli, (Amsterdam: Berlage Institute, 2004), 15.

¹⁷ Jane Kramer, "Painting the Town", *The New Yorker*, June 27, 2005, 60.

¹⁸ Neil Smith, "Introduction" and "Is Gentrification a Dirty Word?", in *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, ed. Neil Smith (New York: Routledge, 1996), 39.

¹⁹ Jane M. Jacobs, "Eastern Trading: Diasporas, Dwelling and Place." in *Edge of Empire: Post-colonialism and the City*, ed. Jane M. Jacobs, (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 75.

²⁰ RJ Sluis and Fag Wassenberg, "Urban developments in Tirana: Using the momentum and re-ordering the chaos", in *Making cities work! Comparing between 'transitional' and 'developed' urban and housing models*, ed. Besnik Aliaj, (Tirana: Co-Plan, 2003), 19.

²¹ Sokol Mici, "Doing business in Tirana", in *Albania Business Guide*, ed. Jeroen van Marle, (Tirana: Gazmend Haxhia, 2006), 83.

²² Jane Kramer, "Painting the Town", *The New Yorker*, June 27, 2005, 60.

²³ "Albanie: Edi Rama, le Premier ministre et la mort", accessed February 20, 2014, <http://balkans.courriers.info/article22786.html>.

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Some Academic Publications:

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