

Introduction Continued...

Today we continue with an introduction to *Contract & Contagion*. Here, Angela turns to the questions of theory and methodology that inform her work. For sociologists reading, I think you will find her range of theory and critical engagement with systems theory to be of much interest.

Enjoy. And, see you in the comments.

Part two:

The second question—and it follows from whether and indeed how experimental fields of knowledge are opened—is one of theory and methodology, or how *Contract & Contagion* came to pose the above discussion in the ways that it eventually did. This being the analysis of long-range capitalist dynamics traced through the key concepts of ‘contract’ and ‘contagion,’ and an argument that at stake in these dynamics is not biopolitics (neither the politicisation of life or the (re)vitalism of politics) but oikonomia.

I understand those dynamics as the proliferation of limits and the restoration of foundations of a system that has no necessity other than these intrinsic dynamics. I am not interested in a transhistorical dialectical schema any more than I am in the transcendental theologies of monism —as it happens, both are expressions of the preoccupations of Rationalist philosophers with the mind-body dualism. Something to analyse but not presuppose.

The three obvious theoretical touchstones in C&C are critical race and postcolonial theory, queer and feminist theory and those strands of marxism that range outside both Second International objectivism and Third International subjectivism (not least a class compositional analysis, but I am critical of the mechanical variants of such). Theoretically, C&C is an attempt to push beyond what I see as the various limits in each of these, not least because while it is possible to read these as the respective categories/objects of race, nation, class, gender and sexuality, their distinction as such is based on a false premise. The question ‘How is it possible to put gender, class, sexuality, race and nation together?’ assumes a once-upon-a-time when there was an identity that has since fragmented. I have never experienced these as distinct categories, though I can read them everywhere treated as such. The delineation of discrete sets is explicable in terms of the history of contracts as I note in the remarks on intersectionality, can be discerned in the history of geometry, and can be traced as the history of the boundaries between disciplinary practices and epistemes.

The methodological approach of C&C is influenced by Fernand Braudel’s historiography of the *longue durée*, Gaston Bachelard’s history and philosophy of science, and by Talcott Parsons’ systems-theoretic approach. All of these are modified in particular ways. I disagree with some more than others, but they nevertheless all contribute something which I think is methodologically important to critical theory, and perhaps even crucial when thinking about radical theoretical practices in the present context.

Long-range historical approaches are important if we are not simply to reiterate dogma and desire. Clearly, the more normative those desires are, the less likely it is that anyone is required to give evidence of them. These are the easy presumptions of a generic reader and neutral writer, one who was apparently born knowing all words, concepts, knowledge. There is no such thing. When claims are made about the 'decline of the family' for instance, it is necessary to ask to what extent this is true or whether it articulates a nostalgic desire for something deemed to have been lost. The same holds for any analysis of the shift between Fordism and post-Fordism, of the patently false claims inherent to the very word 'globalisation,' understandings of causal and temporal orders, etc. It is a methodology used against a nostalgic, mythic recourse to history, such as the primitivism of Polanyi; and it similarly turned against presumptions of forward progress or linear development. It begins from the premise that all concepts must be historicized and specified, that impermanence is the only unchanging condition of life. This is Lucretius' influence, which I would say is also the non-Hegelian dimension of Marx's writings.

While the structural-functionalist approach of Talcott Parsons is a claustrophobic expression of Cold War politics, systems-theory is an excellent lesson in the ways epistemic systems are constructed and, read critically, in how to take them apart. It is also an illustration of how systems of knowledge can be 'wrong' but, inasmuch as they are enacted in practices, they attain a material force. Unlike Parsons, I do not think any system is hermetically-sealed. Though it is important to discern the ways in which it is not, even if this is not a question of recognizing a subject. That is, my object is not social movements—I do not think it is the role of critical theory to survey the least powerful nor to prefigure subjects that remain bound to a strictly political understanding of social change. I am more interested in critical theory for movements in the sense that it can point to the limits to movements while—at the same time—tracing the ways in which those limits, the ways in which systems are reorganized, are a response to the challenge movements.

This is why and how C&C tracks the emergence of probabilistic science, adaptive, complex-systems theories, the modeling techniques of fractals, affect and service work, changing technologies of border controls, algorithms, the jurisprudential passage from intention to performance in contract law, human capital theories, and so on. I read all of these as epistemic shifts that it is possible to trace according to the concepts of contract and contagion. Because both of these concepts turn on questions of generation, and specifically, the futurity or entelechy of a system: how capitalism changes while still staying the same.

In other words, long-range history and systems theory are situated within a larger methodological set of questions given by Bachelard's philosophy and history of science. It was Mary Tiles' Bachelard: Science and Objectivity that, a very long time ago, gave me access to an entire series of debates among those who wrote in the wake of Bachelard's insights (Canguilhem, Lacan, Gullaimin, Foucault, Althusser, Deleuze and Guattari, etc) outside the dubious packaging of 'Continental Philosophy' for an anglophone readership.

But the important point to underline here is Bachelard's understanding of what a concept is and does. I understand that people get either annoyed or delighted at what they see as the tendency in C&C, or much of my writing, to skip between idioms. But to be clear: for Bachelard, concepts link domains. And, rather than understand history as continuous, for Bachelard crucial significance is situated in the discontinuities as much as it is important to trace continuities. In this, concepts are not nice shiny words or phrases, that can be juxtaposed or serve only as metaphors. They diffuse precise 'problems' of knowledge throughout a system. They are the conveyances of epistemes, including epistemic objects, and they involve modes of inference and verification, temporal schema of event, duration and scope. They inform the practices and rules of intellectual work, whether or not that work is credentialed, informalized or vernacular.

Deleuze will grumble that concepts can be folded. This is of course true, to an extent, and certainly seductive. But in a context where research and intellectual work increasingly takes place in cross-disciplinary platforms that involve a large component of funding from, say, mining industries or pharmaceutical companies, or where memes become diffused in digital work and in the medium of the internets, or even given the use of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of de-territorialization by the Israeli Defense Force, it seems to me that it is crucial to understand the ways in which concepts continue to link domains and disciplinary practices. Deleuze's understanding of the fold emerges in a reading of Leibniz's philosophy, which was also a theology, a mathematics, a geometry and a philosophy. Given all of this, and given the drive to adopt and appropriate the seemingly novel idea, it is important to make these concepts that link domains into vectors of another kind of politics, one informed by a critical theory of systems (and not just systems theory) and a sense of the precise conditions of that systems' future projection. That is, to not simply be technicians of methods but understand the methodology we work with and are often called to labour for; not only bearers of memes or epistemic objects, but to ascertain (and transform) the epistemological rules or 'logics' of methods as we work with and against them. When Marx wrote of the 'general intellect' in the Grundrisse, he was talking about the subsumption of knowledge and science by capital. The 'general intellect' provides a pool of knowledge and labour through which capital extracts innovation, surplus labour and value. Specifying the conditions of capitalist futurity in this context means elaborating the ways in which concepts link domains and our practices, often 'behind our backs,' and seeking ways to make those links otherwise. That is the connection between methodology, theory and concepts in C&C.