

Thoughts on Measure

By Patricia Clough

The relation between contract and contagion ... illustrates the history and practice of actually-existing contracts as the allocation of risk, and gives an account of contagions as the field of the valorisation of contingency. It is, in other words, the always-present circumstance of a transitional phase in which things neither had to transpire as they did and could always turn out to be otherwise than anticipated. -- Angela Mitropoulos

I could only hurry through Angela Mitropoulos's *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia* and there is no doubt that a much slower reading is necessary to grasp fully the wide implications of Angela's argument(s). A slower reading is especially needed in my case since the theoretical configurations taken up by Angela are precisely those that I have written about in the last twenty years. In my read, I was able at least to notice small differences between Angela and me at every turn in the arguments of *Contract and Contagion*. How all these tiny differences add up is what I cannot engage without further study of *Contract and Contagion*, which I look forward to doing. What I can address is what I suspect the small differences lean upon and that is Angela's reading of political economy, the affective economy, governance, politics and the political in ways that rethink *oikonomia*. Putting *oikonomia* at the heart of her arguments, Angela resists Foucault's take on the family or the shift from the family as model of governance, from the sovereign as a good father, who will provide, to the family as instrument in the biopolitical governing of populations.

Indeed, Angela's suggestion that we think from biopolitics to or through *oikonomia* is to question just how gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and class are to be understood in the interaction between population and family at the point when household work is extended to all sorts of contractual and subcontractual work—where short term, not long term, contracts prevail and where contagion meets contract.

As I have followed Foucault in thinking that the family has become the privileged instrument for obtaining data pertaining to the life and death capacities of populations, I have suggested that the population becomes *the* medium of interests and aspirations, producing conflict and consensus between population and family—or between an intense familialism and what I have called "[population racism](#)." I am aware that the shift I am focusing on is one that concerns the figure of the father/man while it is the figure of the mother/woman that Angela focuses on, but from my perspective the shift to the figure of the mother/woman in household and work also is one in which the family is abstracted to population.

My thinking also has focused on population because I have been concerned with measure in relationship to labor, but a measure of those pre-individual aspects or affects, and the accumulation of [affect-itself](#), or life-itself, at a time when both Marxist and post-Fordist theories of labor are challenged long after the labor process and the production of value have been disconnected from mass manufacture. A focus on measure is to call into question the human

centeredness of our thinking about laboring bodies and their environment—such as household, factory, school, prison. After all, Marx did assume the human organism in his discussion of value and labor and now against that assumption, we must face the labor of body parts, tissue, organs, cell lines etc. and how these are populations that are statistically produced.

In other words, I am not thinking of populations as populations of humans or only humans. I have wondered about the pre-individual and its environment (of course a slower read of *Contract and Contagion* might prove how I should not have focused as much as I have.) My critique of autopoiesis and the organism comes at a moment when family and household are not clearly marked, at least as I see it, and I question therefore whether contractual or subcontractual labor is the extension of household work that Angela takes it to be. Of course it is the case that this labor obliterates the boundary between private and public and all the concepts that adhere to that distinction—body and environment for one, but also quantitative and qualitative measure for another.

I have argued that the organism must be rethought or put back ‘within the wider field of forces, intensities and duration that give rise to it and which do not cease to involve a play between nonorganic and stratified life’ as Keith Ansell Pearson argued sometime ago. (1999: 154). This would introduce into autopoiesis ‘the complexity of non-linear, far-from-equilibrium conditions’, which brings the human to ‘a techno-ontological threshold of a postbiological evolution’ (Pearson, 1999: 216). Pearson’s rethinking of autopoiesis not only looks to the ongoing investment in the informatics of biology, an investment in the biomediated body’s introduction of the postbiological threshold into ‘life itself’, he also takes a look back at the evolutionary history of genetic reproduction, one that is less focused on *oikonomia* than Angela would have it.

This history that Pearson delivers ends in the present opening to the speculative, the recognition of novelty or the unexpected or wildly contingent as productive of value. I have suggested elsewhere that we think of biotechnologies as inhabiting matter, modulating its informationality, its dynamic toward novelty. This is not a mere reduction to the technical but rather it is a demand that we rethink the long held distinction between matter and form, the material and the immaterial and the living and the inert. Not only is our understanding of the body transformed, but so is the technical and technologies of measure.

This leads me to some thoughts about measure in order to rethink the conceptualization of the qualitative as supplement to the reductive quantitative. Not that revaluing the quantitative is a liberating move, but rather a necessary move to grasp how measure is changing—how it is itself becoming speculative in an economically productive way and how it is itself a matter of contagion. The contagious measure is trans-formative; it has an open-ended relation to form itself. In this sense, the contagious measure has the ability to change itself. It is replication without reproduction, without fidelity, without durability. It is this generative differentiation that is repeated. It is the repetition that *is* the difference, the difference that *counts* and which is expressed numerically in code as “a continual replication of numerical difference.” The contagious seeks out code as its medium. It is through code that the contagious measure performs its mutation in and across species, as well as all technical platforms or domains. With the current focus on digital algorithms, we might say more simply that algorithms can change the parameters without a pre-planned strategy.

Recently, Luciana Parisi has written about digital algorithmic architectures proposing that algorithmic architectures can no longer be thought as exclusively aiming to predict or calculate probabilities for an optimal solution. Rather they are real objects, spatiotemporal data structures, where calculation is “not equivalent to the linear succession of data sets,” Instead “each set of instructions is conditioned by what cannot be calculated or the incomputable” (2013). In algorithms “the incomputable discloses the holes, gaps, irregularities, and anomalies within the formal order of the sequence” and as such aims for novelty. From the perspective of algorithmic architectures, the quantities involved are not merely a reduction of qualities, sensory or physical; nor are quantities immanent to qualities. Quantities rather are conditioned by their own indeterminacies since algorithmic architectures are inseparable from incomputable data or incompressible information—that information or liveliness between zeros and ones. Here, indeterminacy is immanent to quantity so that it can produce the event, the novel.

While this turn to a cultural criticism of the abstract, the algorithmic, seems essential to understanding labor now, it also seems that a closer study of Angela’s arguments might turn us to something more concrete, something more specific.

Patricia Ticineto Clough is professor of Sociology and Women’s Studies at the Graduate Center and Queens College of the City University of New York.