SEAN O'BRIEN

Border, Theory, contract:

An Interview with Angela Mitropoulos

Angela Mitropoulos is a political theorist, academic, and activist based in Sydney, Australia. Her work has appeared in journals such as New Formations, Social Text, South Atlantic Quarterly, Borderlands, Mute, and ephemera. She is the author of Contract & Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia, in which she examines post-Fordism and neoliberalism through a critical history of the contract in relation to the shifting politics of the household.¹ In her capacities as both an academic and an activist, Mitropoulos continues to confront the complex and evolving relationships between political economy, border control, and critical theory. Her current project is titled "Infrastructures Of Uncommon Forms." The following interview was conducted over email between 25 February and 25 May 2016.

SEAN O'BRIEN (SO): I thought I would begin by asking you about the importance of history in your recent work, which emerges at the intersection of radical politics, classical philosophy, and contemporary theories of finance, migration, racialization, and detention. *Contract & Contagion* is a remarkable study of the historical relation between the contract form and the *oikos*, where you situate "the late twentieth century...reorganization of wage contracts and the expansion of precarious work"—what you call "necontractualism"—within the "*longue durée* of capitalist dynamics."² In your ongoing research on risk, speculation, and borders, I am struck by your attention to the historicity of both the objects under study and the methodologies of analysis at work. Given the complex relationships between political economy and border control, and the life-and-death stakes of migration, clarity of analysis—and of historical specificity—appears paramount. And so I wonder if you could talk a bit about the connections you see operating today between finance capital and the Immigration Detention Network (IDN), considering this Border Industrial Complex (BIC) in relation to its broader histories, and the potential implications those connections may have for political strategy on the left.

ANGELA MITROPOULOS (AM): I am boundlessly curious about processes of classification, how those processes become systems, what it is they do in terms of functions, or are seen as failing to do (which is itself a kind of function), their scope and techniques, if they have changed and how. This is why stretching the historical and geographic lens as far as is possible is crucial. It is the methodical pivot that makes it possible for me to underscore the non-eternal (indeed, non-Platonist) dimensions of epistemological objects and material processes of classification.

And the border is nothing if not a system of classification. While the history of various techniques is far more complex, the consequential historical leap is that the nation-state monopolized control over two things: the legitimate movements of people and money. That has been true since the generalized issuance of passports in the eighteenth century as a regulatory instrument of both identification and the control of movements of bodies through mapped systems and delineated spaces. This is also a time in which paper money also became generalized as fixed denominational and national currency, and linked to gold or another metallic standard (so that a paper note could, in theory and by convention, be redeemed for a comparable amount of metal). It is not insignificant that the establishment and eventual collapse of the Bretton Woods system of finance and internationally harmonized exchange rates, and the rise of the US dollar as the de facto global currency culminated, in the second half of the twentieth century, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and, in their wake, a massive reconfiguration of both currency exchange and border control systems around the world. At stake in both money and border controls is a process of conversion, often violent, into a common measure—but what does it imply and involve for there to be a common measure that has no foundation other than that of convention and, increasingly, where the convention is called upon to facilitate the minutia and speeds of arbitrage and accompanied by speculative risk management instruments that also go by the name of the derivative?

What we witnessed at the turn-of-the-century was that both financial flows and migration became increasingly regulated not through the lens of classical Newtonian physics (which measure time as the movement of invariable bodies moving through a dis/continuous space), but the development of a metrics and management of risk in the actuarial sense. The prominence of non-uniform space-time is what distinguishes finance from money, and gives weight to the former's speculative, actuarial dimension, which concerns itself with what might happen in a range of possible and imagined rather than strictly calculable or predictable futures. For instance, the European border agency Frontex is quite explicit about the centrality of risk management, presenting risk management as its key role within a converging system of migration controls, national security, and counter-terrorism. What it means to leverage a racialized fear alongside the practices of financial speculation is an enormous question.

As to the implications of these changes, much of the left has yet to grasp that we are dealing with systems of governance in which it is not possible to pull apart the state and money/finance—and I am unconvinced that the distinction has ever been a valid one outside of some remarkably fantastical and deeply authoritarian narratives about strengthening the state's regulatory power, presumably against capital, but in practice those regulatory powers are turned toward the conversion of movements into commerce, or the control of labour as part of this conversion.

SO: In its vast complexity, the Border Industrial Complex seems to resist representation, which poses a problem for oppositional strategy. Perhaps you could sketch an image of the way contemporary systems of border control operate, or, as you note, fail to function, or are vulnerable to disruption. I'm thinking here, for example, of the outsourcing company Serco, which is involved globally in everything from transportation infrastructures and health care to prisons, refugee resettlement, and immigration detention, and which for the past few years has been reporting serious losses—partly as a result of the boycott and divestment campaign in which you were involved as part of the Cross Border Operational Matters (xBorderOps) against the 19th Biennale of Sydney over its ties to detention contractors like Serco. How are we to make sense of such an abstract infrastructural network, or locate the concrete sites at which we might disrupt its operations?

AM: The difficulty of representation arises in part because of complexities that do not align with philosophical assumptions that distinguish political subjectivity from economic and financial processes. But also, this is because the BIC is a means of processing political representations, as in: What counts as the political? Where do its borders lie? In "Autonomy, Recognition, Movement," I discuss the ways in which the stakes of border control are the boundaries of the political.³ Political representation is a result of categorical classifications.

Serco and Transfield (now suggestively renamed Broadspectrum) are complex beasts with a rapidly changing history. The latter, originally an engineering company and now a vast infrastructure conglomerate, which has only recently been bought up by the larger, European infrastructure giant Ferrovial, was the founding sponsor of the Sydney Biennale. The call for a boycott (initially called by a Design Academic in conjunction with xborder) was joined by artists and staff who withdrew their artwork and labour setting up the exhibition. That was supported by both online and offline actions, actions in various forums, and of course people in detention camps and those who support them. During the boycott there were also protests by detainees within the Manus Island detention centre. Those protests were met with extreme force, including the murder of the architect and detainee Reza Berati by detention industry contractors. For many of us, these events unfolded together—one moment I was speaking on the phone with someone on Manus, the next I was speaking at a forum of art students about the Biennale boycott and corporate and financial structures.

There was an intensification at this point. We think of materiality as tangible objects when often the most intense material connection occurs through the intensification of affect. At the same time, whatever else anyone tells you, finance is affect. Stock market values are based on feelings. The issue with borders is that they are conducive to ensuring that people on either side of a border *do not* feel affection toward one another, or are repelled, distanced from being affected. Breaking through this division is crucial, as much on this occasion as it was when detainees broke through the fences at the Woomera detention camp in 2002.

As to the mundane practicalities of opposition in this field, financial circuits (which are as much about yields as about speculative values) can be located, intensified, or broken. The mechanism of the boycott is disaffection and affection along other routes. Tickets to *Biennale* events, the promotional activity of social media, pension fund investments...these are all points in a circuit of an industry. It is possible to target the points that convert flows into value for an industry.

This can be tangible (as with halting deportations by passengers refusing to take their seats on a plane in some cases) or it can be intensified through electronic or virtual infrastructure. Refusal and intensification are pivotal to constructing a different "in-between" or "infra" than that sustained by border infrastructure.

SO: I'm also interested in the border as a technology of racialization, and would like to pick up on your earlier comments regarding the passport—which, as Radhika Vyas Mongia argues, emerges in the midst of a debate over migration between the British Empire and its colonies, and facilitates the formation of the modern nation-state⁴—and the unfolding relationship between the movement of people and the movement of money that you outline above. In "The Performative Economy of the Racial Speculative," you argue that "the mundane technical and organizational procedures of national security and migration policy have been completely reshaped by the precepts of financial speculation and, at the same time, the concept of race has come to be defined less in terms of origins or the past than through speculations about potential and vague threats that may occur in the future."⁵ Given these interrelated developments in national security and in the concept of race, how do you see racializing technologies like the passport being adapted to suit the purposes of a profit-driven Border Industrial Complex?

AM: In its contemporary sense, the passport is a decipherable packet of data in a system that screens for such things as comparable risk level, location, itinerary, conditions and rate of movement. I think it was Benedict Anderson who called passports—and their function as a means of allocating people to different queues at airports and ports—a differential tariff on human labour. The implication is that passports are a global or single-licensing system (one that presupposes the extraordinary reach and extension of imperial power of previous centuries) that makes it possible to regulate the rate of movement and intervals between different nation states or "home markets." This is the elementary condition of arbitrage, or speculation on the margins. And they assume an entire industry involved in the collection, processing, and communication of data in real-time. As with the military in the US and to a lesser extent Europe, the vast majority of this is undertaken through outsourcing. These "regular" functions have increasingly been accompanied by the growth of a national security industry, one that undertakes risk evaluations whose formulations rest not on what can presumably be predicted from the past behaviour of a class of persons (or "country of origin" and conventional forms of racial profiling) but instead on non-linear variables such as "desire" (as one Serco report put it in relation to detainees) or unforeseeable, undecipherable figures such as the "irregular migrant," or even the "lone wolf," or the "home-grown terrorist." The point here is that statistical probabilities can only be derived from delineated classes of things that persist into the future, and given that unauthorized migration refuses the futural certainty of this condition, it throws into disarray the scientific and political premises of statistical reasoning—this is the technical gist of the argument in "Archipelago of Risk."⁶

So, in addition to the highly lucrative growth in biometrics, e-passports, auditing and screening systems, and so forth that read legible bundles of data that pass through a port (which is, after all, the meaning of a pass-port), there is another level of national security that, in focusing on the unreadability or unpredictability of risk (or uncertainty), skips over the utilitarian protocols of the

“cost-benefit” analysis and into sheer speculation of catastrophic threat that, more or less explicitly, take their imaginary cues from concepts of a coming Manichean, racial Armageddon.

At the conjuncture between these two kinds of risk management (the probabilistic and the speculative), there are the personnel of private security contractors (many of whom are also detention industry contractors) who travel with immunity from screening and regulation on diplomatic passports.

SO: Perhaps then we could say that the passport is an example of how “the stakes of border control are the boundaries of the political,” as you put it above, insofar as it sorts circulating bodies according to risk—designating certain bodies as subjects of political agency within the framework of the nation state—as part of a financialized risk-management enterprise that is fundamentally global in scope. Within such a system of classification, how might an attention to migratory flows—and what you have called “the autonomy of migration”⁷—recast the subject and terrain of the political as such?

AM: If I remember it accurately, my essay on autonomy, movement, and recognition traces an argument from Mario Tronti about the reliance of capital on the state to accomplish “consciousness.” As I read that, Tronti is echoing what Marx says when he writes of the history of the “normal working day”—that it presupposes inter-firm co-operation that does not drive down wages to unsustainable levels. Tronti does not quite relinquish this notion of intellectuals (or the party) as a form of consciousness of “the working class,” even though he raises some serious doubts about its veracity or necessity for political change.⁸ At the end of the autonomy/movement essay, in the final paragraph, I took my leave of the *Operaisti* reluctance to fully let go of the Hegelian concept or dynamic of recognition. I also do not think that the *Operaisti* developed a theory and critique of fascism, and this is a related if larger question. But the more important question for me, at present, is this issue about inter-firm and inter-national cooperation, which appears in the form of risk metrics and the current effort to develop a new standard metric that can operate at different scales. Schengen overtly situates risk analysis at the centre of its concerns.⁹ As do other border control systems—many of which are using an increasingly standardized risk measure preoccupied with uncertainty.

The point to take from this is, that with regard to questions about the subjectivity and the political, is that the latter becomes a field of speculative aesthetics, of affection and disaffection, and not a terrain of institutional or ontological consistencies that draw their weight from past occurrences. This is the Knightian conceptual distinction between calculable risk and uncertainty.¹⁰ The distinctions between and shapes of politics and economics, as well as subject and object, undergo a liquefaction but also a yearning for solidity. I am alluding, in part, to the extent to which most commentators repeatedly claimed that Donald Trump would not gain much political traction in the US presidential primaries. For me, that signals an epistemological failure on the part of the commentators. But also an important question: to what extent is a revolutionary politics concerned with a non-utopian trajectory (the *clinamen*),¹¹ as distinct from the fascist idea of revolution as restorative of a true or natural order? And on this point I am close to Marx, who preferred science fiction to the more ‘sober’ imaginings of the utopian socialists—for the simple

reason that one understands itself as the conjectural flight of imagination and, at the same time, notes (along with Marx the materialist) the extent to which our imaginations are a product of one’s space-time.¹²

SO: As you note in “Precari-Us?” the concept of precarity evokes notions of normative order, tending to suggest in its very grammar a restorative politics typically marked by a nostalgia for Fordism and a desire for return, not only to the Keynesian social wage but often to the workerism of the period and its traditional forms of political organization (like the party and the nation state).¹³ I’m thinking, for example, of Universal Basic Income programs currently on offer from austerity governments and the social democratic left alike, which are regularly justified in the language of precariousness, and which involve jettisoning the last vestiges of the welfare state in favour of work-for-benefit schemes and pointless jobs. At the same time, precarity has animated a more radical politics since at least Euro May Day 2004—at times arguably trafficking in the radical negativity of the *clinamen* and a Lucretian cosmology of the swerve—even as the optimism initially attached to the term and a sense of its capacity to unite precarious subjects across various lines of social division has waned. This is perhaps another way of approaching the question that opens this dossier developed (and the conceptual limits embedded therein): how might we think through the possibilities for collective life at a moment when the promises of liberal democracy heralded during the early postwar period have given way to the perils of a neoliberal order seemingly able to endure its own crises?

AM: Whose crisis? And what does it mean to think through? In *Process and Reality*, Alfred North Whitehead remarks at one point that, “The appeal to a class to perform the services of a proper entity is exactly analogous to an appeal to an imaginary terrier to kill a real rat.”¹⁴ His point (as I read it) concerns a shift from categorical to propositional logic, though it is unclear to me what the status of a proper entity might be outside of grammatical and syntactical functions within either of these formulations. The salient point in a discussion of the concepts of precarity and precariousness is that concepts inscribe limits, whether those are understood as the modal possibilities of phenomenological thought or the probabilistic ranges of statistics from which norms are derived. What do we mean by collective life? What are the boundaries of this entity? To what extent is this part of the taxonomic ranks of individual, family, party, nation, race, and species-being? To what extent does categorical thought rule out thinking about something other than the continuity, preservation, or restoration of those categories? By my reading of the history of the concepts of precarity and precariousness, they mark a crisis within those disciplines situated at the intersection between mathematics and social policy, or between enumeration and validation.

I am far more interested, then, in thinking about the politics of the in-between, the infrastructural, both in terms of what a managerial infrastructure means and entails, and what it would mean to instead think about unconditional (rather than universal) reasons for care or welfare. The contemporary, increasingly outsourced welfare state is concerned with both yielding a measure of social volatility (that would replace GDP measures) and would be amenable to the conversion of “the poor” (and indeed, all “social problems”) into an asset class, while, at the same time, heightening the capacity of the (familial) household to absorb downside risks. This is a key form of

displacement of crises, if by this we mean impoverishment, exploitation, the distribution of life-chances, and so on. So, too, is the central calculus of this financialized, post-welfare state, if you will—it posits a question about displacement in terms of which transaction costs (which relationalities) should be underwritten or not. We can, I think, give an answer to these questions that does not involve the selective conservation of commonplace properties, the reproduction of “the race,” the nation, and so on. Simply put, this is a question about uncommon forms.

SO: The unconditional, the uncommon, the infrastructural: these concepts arguably offer the coordinates of a political and a theoretical endeavour free from the reproduction of taxonomic classification systems and the reactionary conservatism of certain forms of categorical thinking. In your reading of Lockean contract theory and its place in the capitalist arrangement of risk, you’ve noted, “insurance would eventually align with the ideology and practice of the family wage (as in the form of “breadwinner” insurance) to become the morally sanctioned alternative to unconditional welfare.”¹⁵ Despite subsequent transformations in this arrangement—the eclipse of the historically exceptional “normal working day,” for example, and the rise of neocontractualism—critical accounts of contingent labour assume, in your account, Lockean precepts of right, and so remain bound to the taxonomic and the categorical. How might a focus on the distribution of risk, as you see it, shift the coordinates of the conversation?

AM: The politics of rights remains, simply put, attached to a property (of categories). However much we twist this around, this is the course of its reasoning. To be very clear, however, while a critique of liberalism and its limits is of the utmost importance, I do not approach this from the angle of suggesting that the expansion of rights in the latter part of the twentieth-century coincides with the rise of neoliberalism. I have, for instance, no problem whatsoever with undocumented migrants themselves referencing the Refugee Convention in order to get across a border or women insisting on the right of self-possession (as with arguments about reproductive choice) if this is what works. For centuries, rights have been attached to the head of the household (or the nation, as with sovereignty), so it is important to be careful about the reasons why some suddenly discover a critique of rights at this point in history, even as I might query the effectiveness of such an approach beyond individual cases. But nothing is gained by punching down, as it were. That said, it is precisely because rights are attached to the ownership of property that they have for centuries been limited in this way. Lockean liberalism is indicative of the range and meaning of those limits.

There isn’t a great distance between the politics of rights and questions of risk in epistemic or philosophical terms. What there is, in my view, is a shift in the question from the possession of properties which validate rights to a question about the calculations made which allocate both/either upside and downside risks and which validate them either retrospectively or as an *a priori* transcendental good. It shifts us from a question about metaphysics to physics, from (transcendental) ideas to the processes of materialization. Breaking with metaphysical rules, which validate the distribution of risk, is a crucial step in refusing those values retrospectively assigned by theologies of providential grace (whether the prosperity doctrines of Pentecostalism or Adam Smith’s “invisible hand”), as well as the forward-oriented calculus of a moral economy and capitalist futurism. This is not a question

of increasing the rate of movement or momentum, as if we are engineers running a production line. Nor is it one of restoring the purported unity of categories at some loftier level. Instead, it poses a question about the material distribution of power, life chances, futures, and the materiality of the in-between. It is a question that is possible at both intimate and wider scales without presuming an isometry at each, and which underlines the stakes in each moment.

SO: Much of our conversation has revolved around the reproduction of capitalist categories in critical discourse. One way to trace an often inadvertent attachment to the contract form and property rights is through the concept of the commons, which as you note, “emerged from the property law concept of *res communes* (meaning: “it is in common,” or is common property),” and “involves assumptions about what it means to share properties and what it means to posit a notion of commonality or preponderance as the basis for resolving questions about the just distribution of goods and resources.”¹⁶ In the politics of reproduction advanced by thinkers such as Silvia Federici and Peter Linebaugh, for example, “commoning” is offered as a means of (among other things) collectivizing reproductive labour amidst increasing indebtedness,¹⁷ but arguably risks reproducing a series of categories attached to the capitalist organization of risk and the *oikos*, not least the category of gender itself. What are the limits of “commonizing” politics, in your view, and how might an attention to those limits generate new modes of critical engagement?

AM: I have no interest in scolding people with very little power for the tactical and fleeting invocation of terms to which they have no attachment. And I think it is important to state this and be clear about its circumstances and conditions. The task of critical theory, however, is to pose questions about impediments to change. I do not mean that it is differentiated by involving broader numbers or universal questions as distinct from individual cases, but that the choices we make when writing or we feel make sense as theorists are always implicated in the evaluation and dispersal of values and forms of attachment, investments, and affections. And so, for instance, while a group might seek out funding for a project by calling it “a commons,” the obligation to do so was already established by, say, a detailed evaluative framework at the level of the Global Environment Facility, created in 1990 by the World Bank and the United Nations. It is not enough, as a theorist, to say that this “global commons” is different from a “local commons,” since this neglects the ways in which financial values and the associated validation of norms and laws operates at different scales, indeed the very way in which scalability is a crucial part of the personified categorical ranking of individual < familial/cultural < national < international. This is, after all, the simultaneously mathematical and ontological terms of Garret Hardin’s “The Tragedy of the Commons,” and more recent common-pool resource management theory.¹⁸

There is, within this, a continuity of logical and theological terms between the Christian concept of oikologia or “the ecological household” (which draws upon a revised notion of Adamic stewardship, and therefore implicitly a reified concept of nature as property) and the idea that the purportedly natural or reproductive labour of women (or women “going into labour”) belongs “to everyone in common.” I am honestly not sure how either of these differ from the Catholic Church’s position (or Natural Law theory), nor particularly the second of these, from how the Evangelical Right in the US understands and frames the issue of abortion post-Roe v Wade’s invention of the

“state’s compelling interest in the potential human life.”¹⁹ Both of which treat labour as the common property of the domestic/national/corporate household, including that reproductive labour which is said to be the natural proclivity of women, and which therefore should be “gifted” as such to those who by (legal or divine) entitlement own that property.

We could say a lot of things about this, including that it is the source of hatred for sex workers and, at the same time, that it is ultimately a means of diminishing the transaction and labour costs of entitled owners. I am, of course, not suggesting that either Linebaugh or Federici would disagree. Far from it. I respect them and remain indebted to both their work, above all because they have consistently been attentive to issues such as the criminalization of the poor, the historic importance of the plagues to the history of capitalism, and the conversion of women’s bodies into private property. They both are responsible for some of the most important breakthroughs in post-Marxian communism, if you will. They gave us histories of gender and racial conflicts that were not cast as categorically distinct from the histories of class conflicts. My concern is to press further, and clarify the logical systems, calculus, and processes that as theorists we perpetuate and call upon because, after all, they draw their power and their making sense from the power and sensibilities of classical European philosophical and scientific paradigms concerning the properties of things and the validity of norms and laws (including property law). They are systems of logic, but they are also forms of desire, power, and affection since no logic stands on firm, eternal foundations.

In my experience, I do not think that stories about what “we” have in common are the precondition of change or movement. On the contrary, movement presupposes the traversal of a limit, that moment when the categories through which things made sense no longer do, or quite do. I prefer the catalysts of defamiliarization, disaffection, estrangement—Brechtian perhaps, but I think also queer.

NOTES

- 1 Angela Mitropoulos, *Contract & Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia* (Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2012).
- 2 Ibid, 27.
- 3 Angela Mitropoulos, “Autonomy, Recognition, Movement,” *the commoner* 11 (2006): 5–14.
- 4 Radhika Viyas Mongia, “Race, Nationality, Mobility: A History of the Passport,” *Public Culture* 11.3 (1999): 527–56.
- 5 Angela Mitropoulos, “The Performative Economy of the Racial Speculative,” paper presented at the 2014 Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association Conference, Brisbane, Queensland, 4–5 December.
- 6 “Archipelago of Risk: Uncertainty, Borders and Migration Detention Systems,” *New Formations*, 84–85 (2015): 163–183.
- 7 Mitropoulos, 8–13.
- 8 Mario Tronti, *Operai e Capitale* (Torino: G. Einaudi, 1973).
- 9 The Schengen Agreement in effect established a European zone within which passports are, for the most part, uniform (or abolished as internal conditions of movement), and which, in 2016, were reinstated in a number of cases.
- 10 Frank H. Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2006).
- 11 The *clinamen* is the Lucretian term for the unpredictable swerve of the atom, which modifies the field of atoms in motion.
- 12 Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” (1848).
- 13 Angela Mitropoulos, “Precari-Us?” *Mute* 1.29 (2005): 88–92.
- 14 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 228.
- 15 Angela Mitropoulos, “The Time of the Contract: Insurance, Contingency, and the Arrangement of Risk,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 111.4 (2012): 768.
- 16 Angela Mitropoulos, “The Commons,” in *Gender, v2: Nature*, ed. Iris van der Tuin (London: Macmillan, 2016), 165–81.
- 17 See, for example, Silvia Federici, “Feminism and the Politics of the Commons in an Era of Primitive Accumulation,” in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012): 138–148; and Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014).
- 18 Garret Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162.3859 (1968): 1243–48.
- 19 United States Supreme Court, *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).