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Article:

Tomlin, Hannah (2019) Book review: Emanuele Lugli, The Making of Measure and the Promise of Sameness. *Aspectus* (1). pp. 1-2. ISSN 2732-561X

10.15124/yao-arqyb2ww

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ASPECTUS

A Journal of Visual Culture

HANNAH TOMLIN

Review: Emanuele Lugli, *The Making of Measure and the Promise of Sameness.*

Issue 1 - 2019

ISSN 2732-561X

pp. 1-2

University of York

Published: 2 October 2019

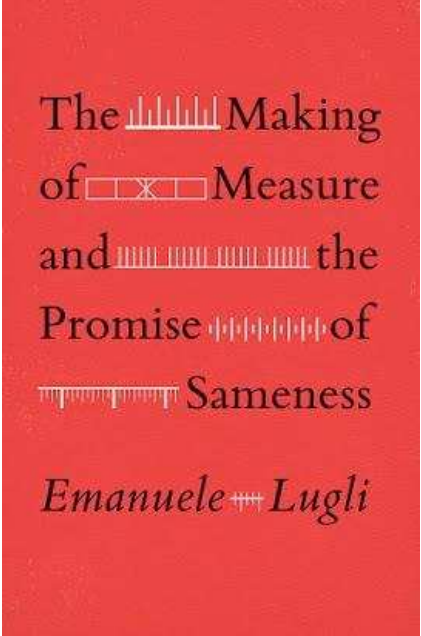


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Emanuele Lugli, *The Making of Measure and the Promise of Sameness.*

HANNAH TOMLIN



The Making
of Measure
and the
Promise of
Sameness
Emanuele Lugli

Emanuele Lugli has created what he calls a ‘collection of stories,’ⁱ centring on the ways in which measurements were conceived of, used and enforced from the middle ages through the nineteenth century to the present day. He takes what appears to be a very dry and straightforward subject and reveals it to be a richly complex and fascinating phenomenon, drawing on a strong interdisciplinary research base and past interest in the subject in order to do so.ⁱⁱ

Part One, ‘*Safes*,’ deals with the ways in which modern standards of measurement were developed, turned into tangible objects and presented as neutral standards by which the world is governed, whilst they were, in fact, imposed upon it.ⁱⁱⁱ Part Two, ‘*Squares*,’ considers the ‘*pietre di paragone*’ of the renaissance and early modern period, the often overlooked standards of measurement that may still be visible in their physical form on the sides of civic and religious buildings and monuments across Italy. These measures served to represent power and convey it between royal or aristocratic powers, civic authorities and the populations they governed. Whoever controlled the means of measurement controlled the means of policing all manner of affairs from building to trade, with the physically and publicly manifested forms of measurement fostering communal ownership of these activities and co-operation with the governing bodies that controlled them.^{iv} Part Three, ‘*Cities*,’ demonstrates that the involvement of religious orders in the implementation and enforcement of measurement standards lent gravitas to these systems by imbuing them with a sense of cosmic order and righteous justice.^v Finally, in Part Four, ‘*Fields*,’ Lugli creates what he calls ‘an archaeology of medieval measurement,’^{vi} to demonstrate the ways in which measurement systems drew on historic practice, where past examples were drawn on as authorities and examples designed to lend new systems legitimacy through a sense of atemporality and inevitability.^{vii}

This idea of an archaeology of measurement defines the methodology that underpins the book. Lugli draws on social, economic, political and art histories, with sources ranging from physical objects and buildings to legal documents, treatises, poetry and mathematical ideas. He uncovers layers of meaning, piecing fragments of stories together to formulate his argument. Given the complexity of his chosen topic, such a full complement of source material is hardly surprising and neither is the need to frequently restate his conclusion that measures are both the products and producers of power and that they reinforced and were reinforced by the power structures that used and manipulated them.

With such wide-ranging material, an eclectic methodological basis and a potentially circular argument, combined with a constant blurring of lines between abstract and concrete, this book should, by rights, be an unwieldy and confusing thing. Lugli, however, navigates the obstacle course he has set up for himself with considerable agility, marrying anecdote and theory seamlessly and handling a frankly staggering source base in a way that might even be described as virtuosic.

That said, this agility means that it is not always an easy task for the reader to keep pace. In spite of a remark in the preface that encourages readers to rebel against traditional reading tendencies and consume the volume out of order,^{viii} references are made throughout the text to what has come before, as if the reader was, in fact, perusing in a conventional, cover-to-cover fashion at odds with the intent of the author. This promotion of a controversial reading order is combined with a reverse-chronological structure, and this combination is intended to subvert the idea of modern measurement systems as inevitable, natural and ideal ways of interacting with our physical and ideological environments. This apparent need to subvert a traditional chronological approach has the potential to be confusing at times. Working backwards diminishes the sense of an overarching narrative to tie the ‘collection of stories’ together and an attempt to read any of these stories out of order would surely muddy the waters still further.

Lugli’s desire to encourage a fresh approach amongst scholars to the notion of scale, measure and sameness is very plain, and this book certainly provides plentiful food for thought on a subject that is so little considered amongst art historians who quote numbers of metres and *braccia* with minimal thought for the implications of these terms. I cannot help but wonder, however, whether the novelty of his approach is the product of a need to overstate the argument in the face of challenges presented by the covering of what is, essentially, virgin territory. This realisation mitigates any sense of confusion felt regarding the structure or prompts to read out of order. Dealing with the book’s chronology according to the scale of measurements and the defining characteristics of the systems used in different époques provides a satisfying parallel and a framework for Lugli’s collection of stories that overrides the need for narrative. Reversal of chronology and prompts to read out of order should not necessarily be taken literally. Rather, they should be considered as encouragement of thoughtful consumption of the text, whether cover-to-cover/reverse-chronologically, backwards/chronologically or at random according to whim.^{ix}

It is this acute sense of reading behaviour that renders *The Making of Measure and the Promise of Sameness* so compelling. Emanuele Lugli’s self-awareness and genuine fascination with his subject matter are abundantly clear and his desire to promote engagement with the stories provides an overarching sense of cohesion that knits the work together. Lugli systematically tears preconceptions asunder in order to force readers to consider whatever they think they know about measurement and uniformity and, in doing so, creates a work that encourages fresh thinking about a subject long overdue for consideration.

ⁱ Emanuele Lugli, *The Making of Measure and the Promise of Sameness* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2019), 215.

ⁱⁱ For more of Lugli’s work on measurement, see Emanuele Lugli, ‘Hidden in Plain Sight: The “Pietre di Paragone” and the Preeminence of Medieval Measurements in Communal Italy,’ *Gesta* 49, no. 2 (2010): 77-95; Emanuele Lugli, *Unità di Misura: Breve Storia del Metro in Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014), and a special edition of *Art History* edited by Emanuele Lugli and Joan Kee - *To Scale, Art History* 38, no. 2 (April 2015): 246-403.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lugli, *Making of Measure*, 3-56.

^{iv} *Ibid*, 57-108.

^v *Ibid*, 109-160.

^{vi} *Ibid*, 210.

^{vii} *Ibid*, 161-208.

^{viii} *Ibid*, xvi.

^{ix} Lugli makes his desire to rewrite the history of measurement very plain throughout the book, but particularly in the preface, ‘*Written in Stone*,’ xi-xvii.