

The Difference and Repetition of Gabriel Tarde

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In an effort to reverse the “standard” presentation of the relations between Durkheim and Tarde from the point of view of the birth of the human sciences (“scientific morality” *versus* the “psychologistic” tradition), this article attempts to understand the primary importance that Gilles Deleuze has ascribed to the “philosophy of Gabriel Tarde” ever since *Différence et répétition*.

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In a coincidence too happy truly to be classed as such, Tarde has been back in print for several years now in France as a *philosophical Spoilsport* [*Empêcheur de penser en rond*].¹ This is, admittedly, easier to say than to *be*. Indeed, the Spoilsport will have to be sufficiently eccentric in a time that, from the point of view of History, does not belong to him (he will engender no ‘school’), in order to become actively untimely in our own... Sometimes it is a matter of *trends* [*tendances*] and *relations*. Let us assert that, as a general rule, something must have ended badly (historically speaking) in order to *return* [*ça revient*], in order to *become good again* [*ça redevient bien*].

Thus, in the sociological field, we are supposed to know that Tarde was the unfortunate adversary of Durkheim in his role as the heir to an “individualist” and “psychologist” tradition that was incompatible with the methodological requisites of the new science or with the prospect of founding a “scientific morality”. To object that this was decidedly not the case – as Tarde the accused did continually – because the question is entirely opposed to an “interpsychology” and to an “inter-mental” (or “inter-cerebral”) psychology that explores the Social on the basis of the inter-individual Relation in order, by the latter, to better provide the former with a power of invention that exceeds the Individual on all sides and that projects society to the rank of *collective brain*...is pointless.²

On a philosophical plane, more favourable in principle because we agree to recognise in Tarde the “metaphysician” among the sociologists³ – elected in 1900 to the Chair of Modern Philosophy at the Collège de France – his *neo-monadology* clearly played an absolutely determining role *between* Maine de Biran⁴ and Bergson, based on his conception of a *creative energy*, “always double ... at each superimposed stage of universal life”

according to “the great distinction between the static and the dynamic, which also contains the distinction between Space and Time, [in as much as it] divides the entire universe into two” (Tarde 2001: 205–6).⁵ At Tarde’s death in 1904, Bergson would pay a glowing tribute to the thinker “who opened so many horizons to us”... But what, serious minds will ask, is the connection between the man who is presented as a peculiarly “missing” link in [*de/dans*] late 19th century metaphysics, and our current philosophical horizon, dominated as it is by a moral and political thought of “Germano-Anglo Saxon” obedience, marked by the tutelary figures of Rawls and Habermas? To assert here (the philosopher addressing his colleagues) that Tarde was the Third man who will enable us – at the level [*plan*] of the history of philosophy! – to take a fresh look at the question of the *sense* of the “relations” between Nietzsche and Bergson is of little use. To add to this that their “wedding” bore in its brilliance a philosophical contemporaneity to which Tarde was no stranger... will frankly cast you in a very bad light.

The fact remains that the “cultural” debate is periodically dominated, as we cannot fail to notice, by the persistent question of *la pensée* 68 and of the *cattivi maestri* whose symbolic execution seems decidedly interminable... One of these was a philosopher named Gilles Deleuze to whom is entirely due the most significant rediscovery and rehabilitation of Tarde’s oeuvre. We are in 1968, the book is called *Différence et répétition*, it is to be conceived as the defining work of Deleuzian philosophy, and, in it, Deleuze confers an importance of the highest order to the “philosophy of Gabriel Tarde”. To the point of quoting *de facto* from Tarde the *formula* in the title: *repetition as the differentiator difference*, thereby implying a double construction taken from Tarde: “repetition is therefore the process by which difference ... ‘is different’ and ‘is its own goal’” (Deleuze 1968: 104–5n1). Everything happens as though it were *as a Tardean* that Deleuze could have and had to set the renewed conditions for a *philosophy of difference*. Conditions that he would explore, along with Félix Guattari, on the side of a politics of desire, in the guise of a *philosophy of multiplicities and of becoming* in *L’anti-Œdipe* and *Mille plateaux*. For *Mille plateaux* does not only contain an “Homage to Gabriel Tarde” in which the sociologist of *Les Lois de l’imitation* is associated with the molecular domain of fluxes in his capacity as “inventor of a micro-sociology” that is attentive to the active forces of desire and of beliefs⁶ (*imitation is the propagation of a flux, invention is the connection of imitative fluxes*). Its title also is absolutely Tardean in that the term *plateau*, referred back to its use in Bateson (“a continuous plateau of intensity”), depends in fact upon Tarde’s denunciation of its “triumph” in the field of statistics in which it translates, as a term *traced* from “uniform reproduction of the same numbers” signifying “equilibrium”, “mutual arrest of concurrent forces”, *the reversed image* of the dynamic multiplicities that the process of counting cannot but disregard... Beyond Bergson, the consequences can be read in

Deleuze and Guattari: “systems of numbers attached to such or such a dimension of multiplicities” (1980: 32–3; Tarde 2001: 173–91; Antoine 2001: 20–5) – which are always “social quantities” (according to Tarde’s expression) turning the desire that works through them into an assemblage. All this, in the end, as though the criticism and overtaking of structuralism in an ontology of multiplicities depended secretly upon the *reactualization* of this Tardean thinking. A thinking that we may not dare, nor amuse ourselves with calling – following the example of René Schérer – *Deleuzean avant la lettre*,⁷ until we have measured the *constituent* character of its inspiration for Deleuze himself. This cannot be proposed on the occasion of this all-too-brief presentation – but should be recalled in so far as Deleuze will have been the first to recognise in Tarde this kind of “precursor” whose most untimely topicality he knew how to explore.

That topicality is certainly not without relevance to the fact that the edition of *Œuvres de Gabriel Tarde* that I have the privilege of directing at *Empêcheurs de penser en rond* has encountered a considerable response. So much so that one could speak – not without excess, chagrin and regret – of *Tardomania* in the context of the year 1999 which saw the publication of the first four volumes; that year was also called “Tarde’s year” in the edition of the *Revue d’Histoire des Sciences Humaines* (2000/3) devoted to him. The contrast could not be more striking with the opening of Jean Millet’s doctorate, published in 1970, *Gabriel Tarde et la philosophie de l’Histoire*, which, even today, is still – in spite of its title – the only work to present the entire development of Tardean thought since the dissertation of sorts entitled ‘La Différence universelle’, published in 1870 by the young deputy at the Sarlat Prosecution. I quote the first paragraph, *in extenso*:

History commits strange injustices. It was particularly severe on Gabriel Tarde. This man was hailed by his contemporaries as one of the greatest thinkers of his time. He was awarded the most coveted honours: he was professor at the Collège de France with Henri Bergson; he was a member of the Institut; he was President of the International Societies of Sociology and of Law. His oeuvre totals more than fifteen volumes, which thanks to numerous editions and translations extends his renown as far as Russia and America. At his death, he was compared to Auguste Comte, to Taine, to Renan, even to Darwin and Spencer; and Bergson, although somewhat sober in his tribute, held him as an eminent master. And yet, the same man, a few years after his death, was *inexplicably forgotten*. A heavy silence settled on his oeuvre. Over the last fifty years, only a very few studies and articles (and these often of foreign origin) even recall the existence of this great sociologist and philosopher. (Millet 1970: 9; my emphasis)⁸

But can such oblivion – I will not say unexplained but *inexplicable* – be comprehended? Is the inexplicable not what our author did, inexplicably forgetting Durkheim’s signature in his introductory lines to the intellectual biography of Tarde? It is certainly not the case for Laurent Mucchielli in his vigorous attack on the contemporary figures of “Tardean hagiography” and its “presentist transgressions”. See the following:

Durkheim succeeded in incarnating a certain form of rationality – *scientific rationality* – that consists of methods, of examples, of reasoning logic, of standardised procedures for validation and argumentation, all of them things that are not to be found in Tarde, whose thinking belongs more to traditional philosophy, even sometimes to a form of writing and demonstration that is closer to journalism. For, in the expression ‘social science’, there is the word ‘science’. (Mucchielli 2000: 181)

In the anti-philosophical brutality of his expression, this selected passage is remarkable because it explains Tarde’s “oblivion” by reciting the order of reasons for it on the basis of a positivist ideology of science and society that was the foundation of the birth of sociology drafted by Durkheim (in *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, published in 1895) and his school (grouped together around the review *Année sociologique*, launched in 1896–7). Now, it is known that the “functionalism” of Durkheimian sociology served to *reinforce* all the social and human sciences in their struggle against “psychologism” and “anthropologism” – right up to structuralism and the “epistemological revolution” that celebrated in Durkheim the *Galileo of the social sciences* (Bourdieu⁹): according to the wish of the author of *Règles de la méthode sociologique*, it is a question of “extending scientific rationalism to human conduct”... That may explain the following: the rediscovery of Tardean intuitions is contemporary with the criticism of structuralism voiced on the one side by Foucault, and on the other by Deleuze-Guattari: the former leading it towards a *microphysics of power*, the latter two making their project of a *molecular revolution in thought* “in which the distinction between the social and the individual loses all meaning”, because all things are continually constituted from relations of force, because each forces is itself a relation between differential elements, and because the very concept of force is derived from desire. Or, again to use the words of Tarde, whose profound Nietzscheanism avoids in advance the psychologist-individualist trap in which Durkheim meant to shut it away: “Every thing is a society, every phenomenon is a social fact” – “up to and including the infinitesimal that becomes the key to the entire universe” with the Socius as a paradigm of Life, “source of this stream of varieties that dazzles us”. Having asserted this, on a sociological level “it is social changes that must be caught in the act and examined in great detail in order to understand

social states, and the opposite is not true". For the historical process only engages the molar domain of representations and of collective signifiers (as Durkheim objected to Tarde) in a derived manner: first of all it is played out at the infinitesimal level of beliefs and of desires, of the power of affection of these associative, attractive, collectively inventive forces *that do not subjugate individuals without subjectivising them*, without forming the possibility of new assemblages, without reopening totally new processes of individuation. It is thus that "micro-sociology" is not merely an area of social science, in the manner of a discipline entitled "interpsychology" – rather it defines the field of action of a truly, differently materialistic *social thought*. More immediately close to the Chicago School (this is the reason for Tarde's career in America, when he was entirely absent from the European scene), even to the *Electronic revolution* of a William Burroughs (was Tarde not the first to think of the "viral" power of the media?) – than to the Mediology of a Régis Debray taking on the (deterministic) allure of the "Chronicle of a cataclysm".

A materialism that is vitalist through and through, claiming for itself the machinic principles of a political ontology of difference: this is the indissociably *expressionist* (the vital expression of forces) and *constructivist* (the machinic connection of fluxes) lesson of Gabriel Tarde. A lesson that is so in touch with the open process of a Social which we are beginning to know is entirely *biopolitical* as a constituent cooperative power (cf. Lazzarato 2001).

Notes

An initial version of this text was read at the 2001 Salon du Livre, on the occasion of the "Presentation of the DVA Foundation's prizes for translation for the promotion of Franco-German relations", won by Jadja Wolf for her translation of Gabriel Tarde's *Les lois de l'imitation* (published by Suhrkamp Verlag in 2003). This initial version was edited in French and in German by DVA-Stiftung, Stuttgart in September 2001, then reappeared in *Multitudes*, No. 7, December 2001: 171–6, in a dossier entitled "Tarde intempestif". That text reappears here, modified and augmented.

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¹ *Œuvres de Gabriel Tarde* is published by Éric Alliez at Editions Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond (directed by Philippe Pignarre)/Le Seuil (9 volumes published since 1999).

² Read, with an inevitable *retroactive* effect, Tarde's extremely optimistic declaration in *Les lois sociales*: "As for other objections that have been made to me, as they all stem from a very incomplete understanding of my ideas, I will not dwell on them. Of their own accord, my ideas fall upon the eyes of whoever stations himself in my point of view. In respect of this, I refer to my works" (1999b: 61).

³ See especially Tarde's article entitled 'Monadologie et sociologie' (1999a). In his 'Discours sur Gabriel Tarde' (12th September 1909), Bergson says that "Tarde derived [his grand sociological ideas] from certain profound metaphysical views on the nature of the universe, of the elements that compose it and of the actions that these elements exert on one another". It should be pointed out here that, in his study on *La théorie bergsonienne de la religion* (1940), the Swedish theologian Hjalmar Sunden perceived the importance of Tarde in the development of Bergson's thought.

⁴ On Maine de Biran, cf. Tarde (2000).

⁵ Tarde had previously referred in a note to the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* published by Bergson in 1889, an essay "so in touch ... with our manner of thinking".

⁶ Cf. Tarde (1880; to appear in *Œuvres de Gabriel Tarde*). This was, as Tarde himself said, his "first philosophical publication".

⁷ "Tarde, before Deleuze, a Deluzean", writes Schérer in his preface to the re-edition of the *Fragment d'histoire future* (Schérer 1998: 24).

⁸ In 1973, Millet would publish, along with A.-M. Rocheblave-Spenlé, an initial collection of texts by Tarde entitled *Écrits de psychologie sociale* (Tarde 1973). Preceded by *La Philosophie pénale* (in 1972), a number of re-editions were to follow in random order (*Les lois de l'imitation*, *L'Opinion et la foule*, *Fragment d'Histoire future* etc.) without ever having any particular impact. It is true that Tarde's rehabilitation essentially depended upon the "methodological individualism" championed by Raymond Boudon.

⁹ On Bourdieu's "Durkheimianism", see Wacquant (1995).