

Events that Matter

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Introduction

In a footnote to the concluding chapter of his *Social Laws* Gabriel Tarde proposed a remarkable sociological research project:

“If we wish to make sociology a truly experimental science and stamp it with the seal of exactness, we must, I believe, generalize the method of Abbé Rousselot in all its essential features, through the collaboration of a great number of trustworthy observers. Let twenty, thirty, or as many as fifty sociologists, from different sections of France or any other country, write out with the greatest care and in the greatest possible detail the succession of minute transformations in the political or industrial world, or some other sphere of life, which it is their privilege to observe in their native town or village, beginning in their own immediate surroundings” (Tarde 1899: 198)

Tarde's project was not, as far as I am aware, ever carried out. Yet his proposal does indicate two central themes of his sociology. First, Tarde recognised that experimental scientific research demanded an extraordinary attention both to detail, and to the singularity of the case. Tarde was certainly irritated by the vague generalisations which were made by sociologists about the general state of society or politics (Tarde 2001: 205). But this irritation had nothing to do with individualism or a lack of concern with the study of long term historical transformations, nor did it reflect an aversion to generalisation *per se*. In his writing, Tarde often drew analogies between sociology and the study of astronomy and physical geography. Both fields dealt with objects (such galaxies and river systems) which were in continual process of transformation, and whose changing form depended on a whole series of specific conditions and events. At the same time, the study of astronomy depended on knowledge of the relations between objects (gravitation) which derived from an analysis of a very simple micro-astronomical system involving only a small number of bodies. The difference between the study of history and the study of astronomy was

then partly one of emphasis. Astronomers tended to conceal the heterogeneity and path-dependency of systems, whereas historians and sociologists revealed phenomena in all their diversity (ibid: 68-69). Abbé Rousselot's meticulous empirical documentation of the language of individuals stretching over several generations of his own family provided one model for Tarde's sociology, just as astronomy and physical geography depended upon very precise and detailed measurements of specific phenomena. For Tarde, the analogy between, for example, the transformation of social institutions, phonetic systems and the study of the evolution of galaxies or physical landscapes would have been clear enough (Antoine 2001, p.24).¹ The contingent historical formation of a social institutions, galaxies and landscapes could only be understood as a product of a whole series of specific interactions. Just as astronomers refrain from "transforming a solar system into a non-resolvable nebula" sociologists should not frame history in terms of vague generalisations.²

Second, Tarde's sociology is, above all, of a sociology of relations. For Tarde, the elementary social facts were the relations which led to modifications in states of consciousness. Again, an analogy with the field of astronomy was utterly appropriate:

Quel est le fait mécanique élémentaire ? Est-ce le mouvement ? Non, pas plus que le fait social élémentaire n'est la conscience. La conscience est le postulat de la sociologie comme le mouvement est le postulat de la mécanique. Le fait mécanique élémentaire, c'est la communication ou la modification quelconque d'un mouvement déterminé par l'action d'une molécule ou d'une masse sur une autre ; spécialement, le fait astronomique élémentaire, c'est l'attraction exercée par un globe, et aussi bien l'effet de ces attractions répétées, le mouvement elliptique des corps célestes, qui lui-même se répète. De même, le fait social élémentaire, c'est la communication ou la modification d'un état de conscience par l'action d'un être conscient sur un autre" (Tarde 1893)

¹ "Le Nil, ou le Gange, n'est qu'une masse d'eau sans cesse renouvelée et enfermée entre deux rives. La *permanence de sa forme générale*, opposée à la *fragilité de ses eaux*, rappelle vaguement, il est vrai, l'un des caractères propres aux êtres vivants, celui d'une *forme stable* et d'une *matière changeante* (tandis que, dans le monde inorganique en général, la matière demeure et la forme change)".

² In this respect one could say that Tarde conceives of empirical research itself as a form of inventive activity, which should never merely confirm what one knows already, but makes a difference.

As the analogy makes clear, Tarde was not an individualist. The elementary fact of Tarde's system was the relation of modification or communication (such as affect, obedience, sympathy or education), not the subject which was modified. Tarde concludes the footnote of the *Social Laws* with the observation that, in the research project he proposed, "it might be first asked, by whom and how the custom was originally introduced and generalized, among the peasants of certain rural districts in southern France, of not saluting the well-to-do proprietors of their neighbourhood" (Tarde 1899, p.199). In *Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari give a political reading to Tarde's remarks, drawing a contrast between Tarde's political micro-sociology and the reductive sociology of the orthodox Left³. But Tarde's hypothetical question also points to a central theme in his work. For, as I shall argue, Tarde can perhaps best be understood as a sociologist of events. The act of failing to salute was, in Tarde's terms, albeit not necessarily consciously, an invention: an event which came to matter.

Physical, Vital, Social

In Tarde's view the relation between the various sciences is not hierarchical. In his *Monadology and Sociology* he stressed that all the sciences generated their different fundamental entities (the social individual, the chemical atom) but these entities were themselves composite. As the sciences progressed new, and increasingly infinitesimal, entities were generated (Alliez 1999):

"...we do not mean to say that science, as it advances, tends to eliminate fundamental differences, or to diminish the number of unrepeatable aspects of phenomena. For, while the grosser and more obvious distinctions of the mass dissolve under the searching glance of the scientific observer, their places is taken by others which are at once more subtle and more profound, and which multiply indefinitely, thus keeping pace with the uniformities among the elements" (Tarde 1899: 13)⁴

³ "A very old, outdated landowner", they note, "can in this case judge things better than a modernist. It was the same with May '68: those who evaluated things in macropolitical terms understood nothing of the event because something unaccountable was escaping. The politicians, the parties, the unions, many leftists, were utterly vexed; they kept repeating over and over again that "conditions" were not ripe" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 216)

⁴ Marilyn Strathern makes a similar observation in relation to the topic of complexity: "Thus the question of complexity seems from one point of view a simple matter of scale. The more closely you look, the more detailed things are bound to become. Increase in one dimension (focus) increases the other (detail of data). For example, comparative questions that appear interesting at a distance, on

Moreover, Tarde's model for sociology borrowed and reworked ideas not just from, for example, psychology and biology, as one might expect, but also from astronomy, geology, chemistry and physical geography. The social according to Tarde was 'like the vital' but also be could be understood through an analogy to geology, chemistry or astronomy. There were, Tarde noted, "certain obvious analogies" between the sciences: "now my readers will realise, perhaps, the social being, in the degree that he is social, is essentially imitative and that imitation plays a role in societies analogous to that of heredity in organic life or that of vibration among organic bodies..." (Tarde 1903: 11). In particular, the phenomenon of propagation through repetition was universal, although it took radically *different* forms in different domains.⁵ In this context, the physics of waves provided a helpful analogy for understanding the rapid propagation of ideas in contemporary societies:

"I light a match, the first undulation which I start in the ether will instantly spread through a vast space...the well-known laws of Malthus and Darwin on the tendency of the individuals of a species to increase in geometrical progression, are true laws of human radiation through reproduction....nowadays the diffusion of all kinds of useful processes is brought about in the same way, except that our increasing density of population and our advance in civilisation prodigiously accelerate their diffusion, just as velocity of sound is proportionate to density of medium" (Tarde 1903: 17)

According to Tarde, imitation was critical to what it meant to be social. Tarde was continually struck by the rapidity of diffusion of new technologies, ideas, and intellectual fashions ("We...no longer have epidemics of penitence, unless they are in form of contagious pilgrimages – those unique manifestations of the power of suggestion – but we do have epidemics of luxury, of gambling, of lotteries, of stock-speculation, of gigantic railroad undertakings, as well as the epidemics of Hegelianism, Darwinism etc." Tarde 1903: 146/205). In this context, Tarde placed great emphasis on the importance of new infrastructural technologies such as the telegraph and the railway which led to the rapid transmission of ideas. Yet the practice of imitation did not always, or generally, produce uniformity. For individuals,

closer inspection may well fragment into a host of subsidiary (and probably more interesting questions)". (Strathern 2004: xiii)

⁵ The vital and social domains were, according to Tarde, connected by a joint (*jointure*).

institutions and national societies drew together contradictory and generative lines of imitation. The minds of geniuses, for Tarde, were critical inventive sites within which catalytic relations between different imitative currents were forged (Tarde 1902). Yet inventiveness was not just associated with genius: "I have certainly applied the name to all individual initiatives, not only without considering the extent to which they are self-conscious – for the individual often innovates unconsciously, and, as a matter of fact, the most imitative man is an innovator on some side or another.... "(xiv). The moment of invention could be a conscious act, yet it could equally take the form of an internal hesitation, in which an idea or practice which has been repeated routinely, becomes confused, uncertain or contradicted by a newly emergent or foreign idea. An invention can be understood as an event that matters. The attraction of Rousselot's work on phonetics was that it pointed to the possibility, unrealised within Sociology, of a microscopic investigation of the moment of invention. Just as physicists sought to account for large-scale phenomenon through the study of micro-physical relations and transformations, Tarde directed Sociology to the study of the infinitesimal.⁶ At the same time, while he drew inspiration from the work of natural sciences, he did not attempt to flatten all differences between what he termed the physical, vital and social domains.

Archaeology and Statistics

Deleuze and Guattari note that Tarde's work influenced the development of American micro-sociology (1987: 218). The statement is correct historically (Clark 1969, Antoine 2001: 9), but it is puzzling in the context of Tarde's emphasis on the importance of archaeology and statistics for sociological method. How could archaeology and statistics be of interest to a sociologist who extolled the virtues of the Abbé Rousselot's extraordinarily meticulous records of speech in a single village?

In considering the significance of archaeology and statistics in the *Laws of Imitation*, Tarde recognised that these methods had both advantages and disadvantages. Disadvantages certainly, in so far as the use of archaeology and statistics, both 'simplifies and transfigures' social and historical process. For the archaeologist, history "consists merely of the advent and development, of the competition and

⁶ In this context, it is interesting to note that Tarde's major writings coincided with early research on radioactivity by Roentgen and, in France, by Henri Becquerel and Marie Curie. Radioactivity is, of course, an internal event in an entity precipitated by a relation between entities.

conflicts, of original wants, or, to use a single term, of inventions" (1903: 102). Yet this simplification is an advantage too since, in focusing on similarities and differences in material cultural forms over time, the archaeologist is able to make visible subtle changes in such forms.

"Below the surface, in some way, of the violent and so-called culminating events that are spoken of as conquests, invasions, or revolutions, the archaeologists show us the daily and indefinite drift and piling up of the sediments of true history, the stratifications of successive and contagion-spread discoveries" (Tarde 1903: 91)

On the one hand, this simplification makes it possible for the archaeologist to understand changes, in part, as a result of the imitation of external elements and the conjunction of different imitative currents. In this respect, the archaeologist is able to decompose material culture, carrying out a practice analogous to that of chemical analysis: "there is no assignable limit to [the] archaeological decomposition of civilizations: there is no social molecule which their chemistry has not a fair hope of resolving into its constituent elements" (Tarde 1903: 99). On the other hand, the approach of archaeology pointed to what more recent economists of innovation term the path-dependency of technical change (ibid: 100).

The value of statistics, likewise, can be understood through an analogy to chemistry and, in particular, to the statistical interpretation of thermodynamics. In the statistical interpretation, clearly formulated in the 1880s, the properties of thermodynamic systems (energy, temperature, entropy etc), could be understood in terms of the accumulation of infinitesimal changes. Likewise, Tarde valued statistics not as a means to compare societies synchronically, but as a way of making visible the transformation of social entities over time through infinitesimal variation.⁷ In this light, in *Psychologie Economique*, he argued that not just populations but individuals could be distinguished by whether they could be characterised by closed curves (in which imitation was the rule) or open curves (where invention existed) and new possibilities emerged (Tarde 1902: 157). Other curves in which there was temporarily no rate of change pointed to the existence of unstable equilibria:

⁷ In this way, Tarde demonstrates one debt to the work of Leibniz (Alliez 1999).

“Plateaux, let me add, are always unstable equilibria. After an approximately horizontal position has been sustained for a more or less prolonged time, the curve begins to rise or fall, the series begins to grow or diminish with the appearance of new auxiliary and confirmatory or antagonistic and contradictory inventions” (Tarde 1903: 116)

In this context, the possible difference between archaeology and statistics was not so great. Statistics could, in principle, take the form of an archaeology of contemporary life. Indeed Tarde imagined another extraordinary sociological project in which there would be a complete inventory of different kinds of furniture and their annual variation in a given country (ibid.: 112). The critical weakness of statistics was that it only counted phenomena rather than weigh their importance, and it only enumerated those things which could easily be counted:

“...successful imitations are numerous indeed, but how few are they in comparison with those which are still unrealised objects of desire. So-called popular wishes, the aspirations of a small town, for example, or of a single class, are composed exclusively, at a given moment, of tendencies, which, unfortunately, cannot at the same time be realised to ape all particulars some richer town or some superior class. This body of simian proclivities constitutes the potential energy of a society. It takes only a commercial treaty, or a new discovery, or a political revolution, events which make certain luxuries and powers.....This potential energy then, is of great importance, and it would be well to bear its fluctuations in mind. And yet ordinary statistics seem to pay no attention to this force” (ibid.: 107)

Tarde noted that statistics, in the form of movements in the stock market, were already printed in daily newspapers. His political fantasy was that statistics would begin to displace the polemic which tended to fill the press and, ultimately, different branches of statistics would become the day-to-day sense organs of society: “the public journals, then, will become socially what our sense organs are vitally” (ibid: 136). In this way, sociology would be brought closer to journalism.

Following Events

It is commonplace for natural scientists to follow events as they happen. Physical, chemical and biological processes typically can be characterised by their initial

conditions, constituent elements, direction and rate of variation. Even points of stability or equilibria are themselves understood as processes in which rates of variation have been more or less equalised, cancelling each other out. By contrast, social scientists tend to stand aloof from events, preferring to analyse what is common to society as a whole, or understand events in the context of what are thought to be more general social processes. One of the implications of Tarde's work is that social scientists should also be concerned with the study of events in process, and with the course of events as they happen. While social theorists have tended to leave the study of events to journalists, or to the more empirically minded political scientists and historians regarding empirical research as somehow merely derivative of theory⁸, Tarde argued that events needed to be studied in ever-increasing detail. As Deleuze notes, Tarde's sociology is often reduced to a psychologism or an interpsychology. Certainly he was interested in those critical moments, of individual refusal, hesitation, desire, learning, and ambivalence, when what was once routinely imitated through habit is made to differ (Deleuze 1994: 314). But the individual, for Tarde, was not understood as an autonomous agent, but as a site within which events happen, and which came to matter later, and elsewhere. Tarde's sociology could perhaps be understood as a form of research, an archaeology of the present, in which the focus was not on communities or societies, but on the sites, spaces, material forms, and the curves, of variation.

⁸ In this context, a comparison might be made between Foucault and Tarde. Foucault, like Tarde, sought to establish a relation to the work of journalists (Osborne 1999). For Foucault, writing on what he terms the method of 'eventalisation' the more "one breaks down the processes under analysis, the more one is enabled and indeed obliged to construct their relations of intelligibility" (Foucault 2000: 227)

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