

Individual, society and social field. Approaching Gabriel Tarde's infinitesimal sociology

Individuo, sociedad y campo social. Aproximaciones a la sociología infinitesimal de Gabriel Tarde

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Received on: 30/07/2022 **Revised on:** 30/08/2022 **Approved on:** 22/09/2022 **Published on:** 01/03/2023

Abstract

The work proposes to reconstruct the central features of Gabriel Tarde's sociology, with the aim of clarifying its concepts of individual, society and social field. We will seek to show that this sociological perspective, elaborated at the end of the 19th century, is still new today because it implies a way of conceiving the social and its historical processes. Its peculiarity lies in not adjusting itself to the epistemological distributions that have dominated the social sciences until nowadays: individualism-holism, micro-macro, agency-structure. Based on a philosophy and epistemology of infinitesimal difference, this sociology does not have individuals or social systems as the foundation of social life. Its starting point is a field of intermental beliefs and desires where individuals, groups and social systems are made and unmade.

Keywords

Tarde, society, individual, social field, sociology, beliefs, desires, propagation.

Resumen

Este trabajo propone reconstruir los rasgos centrales de la sociología de Gabriel Tarde, con el objetivo de esclarecer sus conceptos de individuo, sociedad y campo social. Buscaremos mostrar que esta perspectiva sociológica, elaborada a fines del siglo XIX, implica una forma de concebir lo social y sus procesos históricos que resulta novedosa en la actualidad. Su particularidad reside en no ajustarse a las distribuciones epistemológicas que dominaron las ciencias sociales hasta hoy: individualismo-holismo, micro-macro, agencia-estructura. Apoyada en una filosofía y una epistemología de la diferencia infinitesimal, esta sociología no tiene a los individuos ni a los sistemas sociales como fundamento de la vida social. Su punto de partida es el campo de creencias y deseos intermentales donde los individuos, los grupos y los sistemas sociales se hacen y se deshacen.

Palabras clave

Tarde, sociedad, individuo, campo social, sociología, creencias, deseos, propagación.

Suggested citation: Tonkonoff, S. (2023). Individual, society and social field. Approaching Gabriel Tarde's infinitesimal sociology. *Universitas-XXI*, 38, pp. 221-240. <https://doi.org/10.17163/uni.n38.2023.10>

Introduction

At the end of the nineteenth century, Tarde set out the foundations of a science of the social that is still unique today, which seeks to formulate general principles, theoretical concepts and research methodologies that consider difference and change as starting points, but also as points of arrival. A science that, starting from the phenomenal variety of the social world, is able to account for its units, similarities and durations, without losing along its constitutive plurality, heterogeneity and dynamism. Thus, instead of postulating structures and systems that homogenize diversity, making it irrelevant (totalism), or affirming a plurality of individualities that render the whole nominal (atomism), it finds an alternative capable of thinking the conjunction of the multiple and different, but without uniformity, and without sticking to static frames, assuming that while there is permanence, there is no change.

According to Tarde, the intellectual framework that will allow this challenge is the thought of infinitesimal difference and its compositions. The development of this perspective is in Leibniz's philosophical thought and an epistemology oriented by analogies taken from differential and integral calculus. Hence, a (neo) monadology and infinitesimal perspective, capable of producing a "quiet revolution" in the social sciences, because it leads to discover that variety, fluctuation and incompleteness are the primary characters of social reality. The same occurs in the realm called subjective or individual — as well as for the rest of nature. Thus, it is a question of producing concepts and methods that account for the "picturesque" of the social as a fundamental feature of its own, instead of considering it as a dissipating appearance, as a mist that covers its reality in the clear, stable, and defined background. This revolution begins when it identifies "the essence and the end of every being with its typical difference" (Tarde 1895a, p.416), and characterizes difference as infinitesimal, i.e., as diminutive, constantly variable or moving, and necessarily plotted in relation to a multitude of other differences of the same type. This is only the first part, since infinitesimal differences can be integrated into sets or, (relatively) durable, homogeneous and unitary systems. The revolution is completed when it is possible to conceptualize these sets or systems as incomplete units, partial homogeneities, and varying durations.

Neither the notion of society, with its totalizing burden, nor the notion of individual with its corpuscular bias, are entirely appropriate for such a sociology. Nor are notions of structure, system, mechanism, and aggregate, or

their metaphors: the building, the organism, the machine, and the whole. To carry out his program, Tarde formulated a syntax supported by a relatively small number of concepts that sought to be alternatives to these classical perspectives. On the one hand, he proposed imitation, invention and opposition as keys to a differential approach to the social field (another key concept). They configure the domain of a differential sociology or of differences and variations, oriented to the study of repetition, interference and the conjugation of beliefs and desires as “elementary, innumerable and infinitesimal” social facts (Tarde, 1898, p. 35). On the other hand, he developed a social logic and teleology to understand the compositions (or systems) that originate and reproduce in that same field — an integral sociology or integrations.

In this regard, Tarde resorts to hydraulic, electromagnetic and epidemiological metaphors that are typical of his theoretical language. It elaborates the important concept of flow, current or social ray, and seeks to account for social life and its difficulties in terms of an enormous multiplicity (a field) of vibrations, contagion or imitative propagations, which unfold as much as they intertwine and combat each other. He also uses textile metaphors (threads and plots) and musical metaphors (assemblies and polyphony) for the same purposes, along with other figures related to the world of mimesis (mirrors and echoes) and dreams (sleepwalking). Most of these images belong to the Baroque tradition, and Tarde recreates them to become means of apprehension, description and (micro) analysis of the socio-historical and subjective world. Perhaps its most original and promising contribution in this respect: the metaphor of the brain as a general model of the social understood as the integral of a multitude of microscopic, and “different” intertwined agents.

The latter will not make the notions of the individual and society disappear — nor will the notion of system. These concepts, however, will be significantly reformulated as progress is made towards an infinitesimal understanding of social life, which requires other actions. First, a critique of the scientific models must be made to reevaluate the picturesque social phenomenon, the exuberance of its variety, its details and features, the profusion of its accidents and its variations. Once this sensitivity for the chaotic has been acquired, it is necessary to move to the individuals in their specific socio-historical relations and practices, since it will allow observing similarities, regularities and associations that can be addressed from the double sociological hypothesis of imitation and invention, without supposing macro-entities that explain them. The concordance between different individuals and the organi-

zation of their reciprocal relations do not depend on an objective spirit, way of production or collective consciousness that transcends and encompasses them. In fact, a certain way of doing, feeling or thinking arises in a given individual, at a precise time and place, and it spreads by repeating itself from one individual to another, associating and resembling them.

If stopping here, it would be individualistic sociology, and many have believed it, including Durkheim (1975), Blondel (1928), and Lukes (1968). But this micro-sociological record relationships between individuals, although indispensable, is still very insufficient. Tarde understands that there is something like a social reality, and that individuals are the results of its consequence rather than its cause. He will argue that this reality is strictly psychic, and that it is found within individuals because it “passes” through them as multiple (micro) currents of opinion, faith, passion, truth and need. The social is therefore not psychological but “inter-psychological” or “inter-mental”. It is shaped by shared ideas, interests, needs, and creeds produced by individuals as complex, variable, and intertwined multilinear configurations. A sea of psychosocial flows in which all subjectivity is constituted, transformed and dismissed. The same occurs for different groups and for institutions or social systems.

For this reason, Tarde (1895, p. 34) says that sociology is the “solar microscope of the soul.” Such a scientific device begins its research by these or those specific individuals, their specific beliefs, desires and practices, but without finding ultimate and private psychological elements. There is a beam of tiny rays or social waves when refining the gaze, each of which has started from a singular but socially configured focus of irradiation (an individual), coming to form relationship lines of local, regional and planetary scales. Micro-mega, such is the paradoxical dimension of the social, its measure and also its status.

From society to individuals

The notion of society is a major epistemological obstacle to an infinitesimal perspective of the social, at least when it is burdened with totalitarian connotations and macro-sociological assumptions. Tarde says that society as a single entity, centered, distinct from individuals, well defined in its limits, separated from the others almost as much as from nature, lacks existence.

The same happens for social history, understood as a process of unique tendency. What Tarde has in mind when rejecting these alternatives is, first and foremost, Hegel's social philosophy and theory of history, Marx's vision of society and economics, as well as the sociologies of Comte, Spencer, Worms, and Durkheim. But, if his premises are accepted, his criticisms will prove valid for any macro-sociological holism, including the functionalisms, structuralisms, and systems of the twentieth century.

These perspectives work away from the level of immediate interaction between individuals and look at social groupings from afar. At a great distance, after the multifaceted bustle of everyday social life, one sees a filigree drawing of (few) powerful structures or systems, which are also strongly coordinated with one another. Telescopic perspectives, for which the real object of study is society understood as a great association. A focused entity with clear boundaries, involving a large number of people, processes and resources, and whose implicit reference is the modern nation-state. Such social sciences only consider the market, the state, ideologies, religion or language as homogeneous structures or systems with great internal consistency.

Tarde understands that these points of view, which he calls panoramic, lead to dealing with associations, regularities and similarities (linguistic, religious, moral, economic or other), which effectively shape the social world. He also substantiates them by referring to them as entity (the totalizing system) that somehow preexists and conditions these relationships, when it does not determine them. The use of these global nouns — the state, the market, the nation, etc. — obscures what needs to be discovered. Namely, the multiplicity of processes from which each of these associations is made, as well as the difference by which it has taken place, and the mutations that constantly transform its configuration. A more detailed approach to the social field will show that there is nothing there like economics, religion or science in the abstract, neither in uniqueness nor in exclusivity. Thus, for example, in any social space, however homogeneous, there will always be certain types of religious dogmas and rites practiced by certain individuals, which exist side by side with (or in conflict with) other religious practices, possessing characteristics, and an evolution different from the former. This would not be a trivial observation if it were not for Tarde generalizing it as a key theoretical-methodological principle. Everything that is social is plural and specific, the social never exists as a unitary organization, neither exists in general or in abstract, and the same happens for all the other practices that populate

that same space at the same time: government, production, law, science, art, family, etc. These terms can only designate collective and specific ways of doing, feeling and thinking, each of which always assumes a typical modality and however, always coexists with others of its same class.

These practices may be in the minority, but they are far from irrelevant, and not only for ethical reasons, but also for sociological reasons. Considering them insignificant practices carried out by a few individuals — let alone by one — is a prejudice close to ethnocentrism and intolerance. But it is also an epistemological (and political) error, because it is unaware that every social practice, however tiny, is always related to others that it affects, however little, and for which it is affected in turn. Such macro-sociological prejudice, moreover, ignores that socio-historical dynamics are not governed by the laws of mechanics according to which only great causes produce great effects. It leads, finally, to analyze societies, their institutions and their majorities as if they were born made. The key, at least for Tarde, is that the opposite is true: every minority can be the germ of future majorities, no matter how bizarre its social practices seem today, and everything important in history has begun not in a minority group but in a singular individual.

What we call social practice, also process or social interaction, has a definition in Tarde's sociology. It is about the imitation of an invention — or, philosophically speaking, the repetition of a difference. All the social practices that we strive to establish (work, family, economy, art, science) are nothing more than an “accumulation of actions calculated one on the other” (Tarde, 1882, p.272), a multitude of specific copies, systematically repeated by a certain number, although variable, of people. Hence, everything that is social happens between individuals, but also has its origin in a particular individual. It is there that the beginning, always minimal and relative, of social things should be sought, regardless of the size they have reached when investigating them. Christian, Buddhist, or Mohammedan religion, Marxist ideology, Euclidean geometry, Newton's law of gravitation, Bentham's panopticon, the Fordist production line, are inventions that bear the names of their visible creators. These are innovations that emerged in a specific field, in specific places and dates, produced by individuals, which then spread imitatively, uniting their path to the individuals who incorporated and repeated them. The same happens with inventions, large or small, that do not have the author's signature, but not because they are the product of general enti-

ties such as a society, a culture or an era, but because their inventor was forgotten or ignored.

It results into the first definition of what a social group is —or society— whatever its scale: it is an “organization of imitation” (Afternoon, 1890, p.91), i.e., of an association woven by the imitation of certain ways of doing, feeling and thinking, which, repeated regularly by a number of individuals, and have specific similarities between them. It also turns out that what is repeated organizing social relations is nothing but an invention (moral, religious, legal, technical, scientific or culinary), produced once by a certain individual, which then branched into imitation series of the most diverse scope. To understand this, it is necessary to say that Tarde provides a very broad sense to the concept of invention, although not for that reason imprecise. He considers that:

All the renovation initiatives that, while bringing to the world both new needs and new satisfaction, spread or tend to spread by imitation (...), more or less quickly but with a regular step, like a light wave or a family of termites. (Tarde, 1882, p. 271)

All of this is at stake when Tarde claims that all social is individual, and, also, that all social is accidental, or what is equal, that the course of social dynamics is always random, and that human history is always and constitutively unpredictable. Contingency reigns over social life, because the configurations and the senses that it assumes depend on the chance of inventions and the chance of repetitions. Tarde understands that the discovery of an innovation, whatever it may be, can take place in any individual, even unintentionally. But this may or may not happen even in those who pursue it tenaciously and skillfully. Its contingent nature is therefore irreducible. On the other hand, even when repetitions become habits and customs, solidifying and thus acquiring enormous inertial force, they can also be interrupted at all times, and be replaced by others or by none. In the same way, this will depend on the chance of social encounters since each one is exposed to innumerable inventions that can modify their behaviors, their emotions and/or thoughts, becoming new habits and customs.

All of this makes each individual extraordinarily important for social life in its historical development. If what we call institutions or social systems are nothing but multiplied and regular repetitions, and if there is nothing (collective consciousness, absolute spirit or mode of production) that can sustain them beyond those individual repetitions, then these systems may or may not

be reproduced in each individual. Each individual becomes, in this way, the possibility of a transformation in the historical course of the systems to which it reproduces, and may even be the moment of its dissolution. Social systems vary infinitesimally in each person, because no one repeats them identically. There can be an invention in each one that acts as the beginning of a different imitative series, modifying matrices of relationship with others and with oneself, valid, sometimes, for very long periods. Thus, Leibniz in philosophy and mathematics, Luther in religion, Picasso in art, but also the first peasant who denied greeting his feudal lord, or the first woman to enter university.

From dots to lines

The double value of the individual is observed in Tarde's infinitesimal perspective. On the one hand, it has a major sociological role. Everything that is social happens in and between individuals, so they have a fundamental socio-historical role. It can no longer be said that things would have been the same in general terms without this or that individual. First of all, because things are never general: it must be said why they were in that way and not in another way, and each individual counts on it. And this is not only in cases where "great individuals" make great decisions. Any action, idea or passion can have consequences given the imitative nature of social relationships. On the other hand, in methodological terms, the individual is a privileged access route to socio-historical analysis, precisely because it fulfills in avoiding the use of general terms and obliges to account for the networks of specific relationships. It is then an antidote to macro-sociological reifications. If reification is the action of turning something into something, Tarde sees this operation in the understanding of the social as collective consciousness (Durkheim), as an organic system (Spencer) or as dialectical whole (whether Hegelian or Marxist). In their eyes, these macro perspectives are substantial since they postulate entities that command the relationships between individuals from above or deep. In contrast, it claims an eventful sociology in which the individual has a fundamental role. He knows, however, that the individual can also be a reification — this time, an atomist. The natural law of Hobbes, Locke or Rousseau and the political economy of Smith and Ricardo seem to be good examples in this regard. Rejecting any supra-individual entity, disaggregating the social into interactions between specific people, these classic

micro-reductionisms, in principle, follow an appropriate direction. Yet their approach is not infinitesimal enough because they fail to account for the (social) relationships that constitute individuals. Methodological individualism is still a panoramic view of the social, since it offers a corpuscular perspective that takes individuals as separate, homogeneous and stable totality. It is also still substantial since it has them for the last elements, “building bricks” of the social.

Tarde understands that when getting closer we will see that instead of preceding and producing social relations, the individual is one of its greatest results. However, that does not return us to the premise of the priority of society and its macro-structures — first, because there would be no such thing. Tarde shares with Marx, Comte, Durkheim and many others Bonald's statement that it is “society that constitutes man, i.e., it forms him by social education” (cited by Lukes, 1968, p.119). But the problem lies in knowing what society is, as well as in determining the specific mechanisms of such training, its modalities and even its duration. According to Tarde, the key to both issues lies, first and foremost, in the concept of imitation. It argues that this is the greatest mechanism for the formation of subjectivities, as well as the mode of production of human groups. In both cases, it is also the reason for the structured but variable permanence in time of both, i.e., what, from afar, is usually seen as his identity.

The first thing to mention is that when Tarde speaks of imitation, he does not refer to the activity of an individual, only that, from the innermost of his faculties, he copies others, in the manner of a subject in front of an object. Rather, imitation is the social relationship in which subjectivity is constituted as a psychic configuration of relative coherence and determination. “One is not born, but becomes like it,” Tarde says (1890, p. 92), and this can only occur by reflecting on others and resembling them. Such relationships occur, most of the time, not only unconsciously, but also inverted, as a good mirror: “to have nothing but suggested ideas and to believe them spontaneously: such is the illusion proper of a sleepwalker, and also of the social man” (Tarde, 1890, p.98). What happens with ideas, happens with feelings, likes and dislikes as well. According to Tarde, we are reflections or echoes of the most diverse acts, words, gestures and states that others transmit to us, wanting it or not, and that we reproduce, always varying them to a certain degree: living and imperfect mirrors.

This formative social influence of subjectivity does not stop in adulthood, nor does its mimetic character change. From birth until death, we copy the actions, thoughts and feelings of others, which we internalize as memory, transform into judgment and will, and put into practice as habits. These mimetic relationships are not limited to a psychogenetic period (childhood), nor to a specific institution (family, school). Everything is pedagogical for mirror individuals, or better, for kaleidoscope individuals. Permanent mimesis also is not limited to face-to-face interactions, nor is it limited to the present. It is a “remote action”—sometimes very long in time and space. It copies everything that has been produced by individuals near and far, known and unknown, in the most diverse eras and geographies, it reaches us through a series of individuals who have repeated it.

Hence, imitation constitutes a type of relationship that can be characterized as linear or, better, as micro-linear. It is an “inter-mental” or “inter-psychological” action that works by linking those who lead it, producing a certain continuity between them. Individuals are intertwined and interpenetrated in it, most often imperceptibly. It is also a contagious form of communication that spreads from one individual to another with variable speed, intensity and extent. Hence, one of the most typical and important concepts of this sociology is that of current, flow or imitative ray.

It turns out that this way of referring to the social has something of a cumbersome and something of a puzzling effect. On the one hand, it aims to identify each invention and each imitative series, and, if possible, each inventor and even each imitator¹. On the other hand, and at the same time, it uses the continuist concepts of current, flow or social ray. The work will prove essential, and the confusion may be tempered by understanding that this (baroque) style depends on a (neo-monadological) syntax that requests it. This syntax states that relationships —lines— precede and constitute terms —points— so that any point is the result of an intersection of lines. He further argues that these terms are never simple, isolated, or neutral, precisely because they are made of specific linear relationships. But they are not passive either, since they produce alterations capable of interrupting and, above all, modifying the course of the lines

1 For this reason, Latour says the statistical and methodological tools Tarde dreamed of, and which are necessary to carry out his sociology, came with the Internet, since they allow us to track exactly “any rumour, any news, any data, any purchase and sale.” The set of devices and techniques that, in a generic way, today we call big data, “is tracking, before our eyes, just the kind of data that Tarde would have hailed” (Latour, 2010, p. 160).

that cross them — which can have consequences which are unpredictable and sufficient given the universal connection of all things. Infinitesimal sociology must therefore necessarily be micro-historical, detailed and differential, as well as broadly cartographic, universalist and integral. Hence the lengthy enumerations to which Tarde sometimes gives himself, punctuous, but not punctualistic, and the extensive historical periods that he needs to travel, even if only in an allusive or brief way. Hence, the seemingly strange operation of valorizing continuous social flows and individuals at once.

The social as a skein, the individual as a ball of yarn

This leads us to introduce another concept, which is essential in the syntax of this infinitesimal sociology, although perhaps under-theorized: the social field. As seen, society could not form individuals since society exists neither in general nor in uniqueness. What is there is an undulatory and plural field. A field made up of a multitude of diverse mimetic rays, whose sources are the innumerable inventions from which they propagate, following specific directions and carrying subjectivation and association modes that are proper to them. Far from constituting a homogeneous totality (society) and from being composed of global subsystems (economy, culture, etc.), this field is woven by a detailed multitude of imitations which, repeating themselves from one individual to another, form specific flows: moral, religious, economic, juridical, scientific, culinary, familial, sexual, etc., and each of them is socio-historically singular. Hence, they have different geographical and temporal origins, and they carry different modes of relationship, understanding and sensibility (worlds). It also means that they run at unequal rhythms, possess dissimilar intensities and reach varied geographical and temporal scales.

Thus, what at a macroscopic distance appears as a block (society), requesting systemic and synchronic treatments, is at the same time historicized, but multiplying and particularizing itself in a multitude of heterogeneous historical wefts (the social field). Everything and every social thing - ideas, emotions, acts, relations, institutions and artifacts - is now transformed into a specific creation among thousands, which spreads carrying its differential genealogy and its characteristic dynamics. Each way of doing, feeling and thinking, as well as each socially circulating object, thus possesses its own internal force, its own distinctive purpose and logic. But this is not all. Each

one, in its apparent uniformity and consistency, is made up of a myriad of imitative currents coming from the most diverse sources and directed in the most diverse directions. Each one is always intimately communicated with a multitude of human beings, living and dead, made in the same way. The individual on an infinitesimal scale, reveals itself rather as the integration, never too coherent, of social forces that configure and exceed it.

Consequently, the imitable and the imitated is never an individual as such, a whole individual, since there would be no such thing. Far from being structured as a fully defined totality, all subjectivity functions as the open and variable configuration — the integral — of innumerable dynamic imitations. And this is as true for the one who copies as for the one who is copied. But, in addition, one never imitates in a global way, but in detail. Models are copied and transmitted, i.e., forms of action, intellection and/or affectation that are always specific, and more or less precise, that are the imitated inventions seen closely and in their sociological functioning. For that reason, when Tarde refers to them in the context of their diffusion, he calls them molds, clichés or, more simply, examples (he could have called them algorithms, or even information). Thus, work in general is not copied or propagated, but, for example, “the art of carving flint, of taming the dog, of making a bow, (...) of fermenting bread, of working bronze, of extracting iron, etc.” (Tarde, 1890, p.47). The same is true for the forms, always social, of love or friendship, food, clothing, art, science, etc. These detailed models which, by replicating and internalizing themselves produce self-similarities (individuals) and by propagating themselves give rise to associations (groups, societies), as well as to regularities in certain shared ways of doing, feeling and thinking (social systems or institutions).

Each individual participates at the same time in different types of relationship, but none participates (directly) in all the existing ones. And, more importantly, each one is simultaneously part of different groupings, which implies that he or she is a regular bearer of practices, thoughts and feelings that, when viewed closely, are never quite in agreement with each other. Hence, someone can be considered, and consider himself, Scottish and English at the same time, practice Catholicism and not reject abortion or drugs, hold sexist and feminist perspectives on different issues and to different degrees, support racist immigration policies and neo-Keynesian economic prescriptions. Those with a passion for systemic coherence will see inconsistencies and/or contradictions typical of agitated post-traditional (modern and post-modern) times. Tarde affirms that the principle of the excluded third party is

not the main operator of social or subjective articulations, and that the adjusted coherence of collective values does not exist in modernity, but neither did it exist before nor will it come later. Given the multi-linear and polygenetic character of the social field, no system configured can be completely coherent, closed, stable or with uni-linear evolution. Thus, it is an invitation to reconsider the dominant narrative, within and outside the social sciences, according to which all past times were organic, well-cohesive and homogeneous.

Every social field is woven by countless infinitesimal repetitions of countless past and present inventions, which propagate at the same time in different directions and with diverse scopes. Therefore, it is necessary to conceive it as a thick interweaving of imitative radiations among which countless interferences, both conflicting and creative, are produced. This makes it necessary to describe social history, not as a single drama developed in progressive stages, but as “that tangled skein, or rather, that confused mixture of multicolored skeins” (Tarde, 1898a, p.61) that unfolds according to diverse temporalities. This “confusion” comes from the lack of a single direction and the superabundance of these radiations in the same social field, but it is important to point out that the radiations do not need to be confusing, and usually they are (they carry precise models). It is also important to emphasize that, in this socio-historical welter of dynamic differences, lasting social and subjective configurations take place. However, they are not the product of organismic or dialectical systems, but emerge as more or less coherent integrations of variable and heterogeneous relations, as (baroque) assemblages.

The remarkable plasticity of these integrations, as much as the associative and subjectivizing power of the flows that compose them, comes from the material from which they are woven: beliefs and desires. In fact, it is there that the most proper level of the social is located. They are the true components and the true agents of social life - they are its force and its substance, as Tarde says (1890). It is the inextinguishable dynamism of these microscopic forces that gives an impalpable materiality to the social; they are the source of its limitless generative capacity, as much as of its surprising capacity for contagion.

Beliefs and desires as infinitesimal social forces

There is here a final micro-analytical shift that does not disprove or relativize what has been said so far, but rather specifies it while at the same time

broadens it immensely. The invented and imitated social models are composed of psychic elements — such are beliefs and desires, but it also requires not to go back atomism, a habit that at every step obstinately reinstates the imaginary of particles. The beliefs and desires in question are certainly psychic forces, but they should not therefore be understood as simply internal or subjective — much less as punctiform and separate. Rather, they are micro-linear, minute, but infinitely complex elements, interwoven in an intensive continuum, i.e., they are strictly infinitesimal.

Tarde (1894, p.240) holds a conception of the psyche according to which beliefs, desires and sensations are “the only elements of the soul”. All subjective processes would then be made up of these three basic components and their combinations. He includes ideas, principles, precepts and judgments in the former; he finds passions, interests, purposes and projects in the latter. The latter are manifested as faith, conviction or reasoning; the former, as will, inclination or intention. As for sensations, Tarde will say that they are qualitative impressions, unique and irreproducible, which draw their proper psychological value from the beliefs and desires that give them meaning and value. Thus, sensations as such are mainly ephemeral, and change from one individual to another, while the capacity to desire and believe “is the same in everyone”. This is because all human bodies would possess the same believing and desiring faculty, and their psychic life would function according to the same basic operations. Namely, affirmation and negation in the case of belief; attraction and repulsion in the case of desire. Each of these operations is subject to varying degrees of intensity, there being a continuum between the two extremes.

For the same reason, psychic life is made of chiaroscuro, and one can perfectly speak of semi-beliefs and semi-desires. As for Leibniz, Maine de Biran and Cournot, ideas, passions and perceptions are conceived as being distributed along a line that goes from clarity and distinction to confusion and darkness, passing through an infinite range of grays. In addition, it is affirmed that one possesses different degrees of consciousness, and that there are unconscious ones. But in all cases, at least for Tarde, these are reversible conditions: the ideas, the inclinations, the interests that inhabit us can pass, by degrees and without solution of continuity, from a conscious state to an unconscious one — and vice versa. The same is true for the clarity and distinction of its contents, as well as for the sign of its dynamics. For this reason, volitional attraction and repulsion with respect to the same object are

reversible, as are its intellectual acceptance and rejection. Beliefs and desires can finally combine with each other in countless possible ways, and in countless degrees, making the systems of ideas and feelings capable of far exceeding the principles of coherence required by classical logic, and they usually do. The fact that they behave like algorithms does not imply that they are consistent systems.

Hence their enormous compositional flexibility, as well as their propagation power. But there is, in addition, a negative condition for both things to happen. Neither beliefs nor desires are determined by the biological needs of the human body, nor by the schemas of an innate reason. Nor are they commanded by a law of culture that is universal in its contents - the prohibition of incest, for example. All of which implies that, by right, but also in fact, anything can be believed and willed. It also implies, as said before, that the interests, convictions and volitions that make up the (intra)psychic life are necessarily received from others, and that they have a formative and structuring value, but also a transforming influence, which never ceases.

At this point it is worth asking whether social life possesses needs and/or reasons that act as foundations of the socially circulating values, interests and tastes that the individual receives and makes his own. Tarde's answer to this question is negative, since he understands that social life is also psychic. Since it is fundamentally made up of beliefs and desires, the above considerations apply to it as well: like individuals, groups can believe and want anything. There is no biological or rational (or theological) basis for common beliefs and desires, nor for the social practices and institutions they mobilize, shape and sustain². Monotheism or polytheism, democracy or monarchy, monogamy or polygamy, modern or postmodern sciences: there are no extra-social reasons for the transmission and institutionalization of certain shared convictions and passions, and their establishment as dominant values, truths and practices. It makes no sense to look for truer truths or fairer values, hidden behind those that prevail in a social field for more or less prolonged periods. It simply happens that many other truths and righteousnesses are less widespread in that same field, and that many (an infinite number) are possible

2 Almost a century after Tarde, Cornelius Castoriadis (2010) will talk about the imaginary self-institution of society. However, one of the main differences of Tarde's social theory with regard to Castoriadis is the "flattening" and radical decentralization of social "imaginary meanings".

and are ready to be updated, i.e., to be transformed into reality through their combination into inventions and their imitative propagation.

Thus, beliefs and desires turn out to be the true infinitesimal agents of social life. Social and subjective reality are made from their propagation, combination and opposition. They are also the cause of the constant mutations that are registered in individuals and groups. For the same reason, it is necessary to conceive that both are configured, transformed and, eventually, fall apart in the most primary field, but which is still, and fundamentally, social. A heterogeneous, a-centered and poly-rhythmic field made of an innumerable multitude of intertwined (inter-mental) psychic forces. These immaterial and contagious micro-vectors present differences and future possibilities, and are configured as models of action, intellection and affectation, and propagate as flows or waves, imposing their visions of the world and their organization forms of social relations. But, in addition, they interfere with each other in two ways: they combine, giving rise to new models that will spread in turn, or they are locked in opposition, producing conflicts, also contagious, capable of acquiring the most diverse intensities and scales, and all this happens at the same time. Systematicity, transformation and social conflict do not occur in large homogeneous blocks, nor in successive stages governed by the principle of mutual exclusion (where one occurs, the other is displaced or suspended). Rather, they take place simultaneously, multiply and dynamically. Tarde also wants to account for this when he speaks of social field or, more often, of social life.

As a way of conclusion

Towards the end of the 19th century, Gabriel Tarde was a world reference in social sciences and humanities. At that time, his sociological, psychological and philosophical ideas had great visibility and interest, his books were translated into different languages and the prestigious Collège of France had a subject for him. Subsequently, all this was practically forgotten, and his name was barely mentioned until the end of the 1960s when Deleuze (2002, 2009) drew his attention to Tarde's grammar of infinitesimal difference, using it in his own treatment of the social and the subjective. Later, Foucault (1989) and then Latour (2005, 2002) will do the same. Since then, Tarde's works have been republished and a growing number of scholars have been dealing

with them, both in terms of the history of ideas and in relation to their possibilities of dialoguing with the present and contributing to understanding contemporary social phenomena.³

It so happens that many of the issues that Tarde centrally addresses in his work are today transdisciplinary concerns, such as social networks, diffusion, innovation, the media, public opinion, the contagion of thoughts and passions, leadership, globalization, among others. But, is the theoretical structure of his sociology interesting only because these “phenomena” are now important? Should we then assume that this social theory was not relevant before and is relevant now, or is it relevant again? This position is valid only if one claims that the scaffolding concepts of a social science change or must change when a society or a period change. Hence, this reasoning would be as follows: systemic approaches are valid for analyzing industrial and national societies, but reticular approaches must be used with the advent of post-industrial and globalized societies, since the notion of network would be more appropriate to capture these transformations. In the first case, Marx, Spencer or Durkheim would officiate as appropriate classical authors, and their descendants and more or less contemporary interlocutors (Parsons, Luhmann, Althusser or Bourdieu, for example) are especially welcome. In the second case, since societies have indeed changed and new objects have appeared, these perspectives are no longer entirely useful. It will then be necessary to develop a new one and, eventually, to seek inspiration from sociologies of the past that might now be useful. So, as far as classical references are concerned, Durkheim leaves (and/or Parsons), and Tarde comes (or Simmel, or Mead). We will not discuss this habitual practice, we will only point out that it does not only correspond to Tarde’s position - nor, incidentally, to that of the other authors mentioned.

As said, according to Tarde, every society, in every time and place, is a network and not a system (functionalist, structuralist or systemic) nor an aggregate of atomized individuals. According to Tarde, the set of similarities, regularities and concordances between individuals, which does not lead to speak of the existence of societies and groups, is due to the presence of similar and precise ideas and passions in each of these individuals. However, these similarities in desiring and believing do not refer to the equality of their

3 For more examples see Candea (2010), Lazzaratto (2002) and Sampson (2012). For the relations between Tarde, Deleuze and Foucault I cite Tonkonoff (2017).

biological needs, nor are they the corollary of an innate reason, common to all of them, nor do they result from deep or transcendent collective symbolic structures that configure and contain them. Rather, they derive from the propagation of interaction, intellection and affectation models which, spreading from one brain to another, form psychosocial currents capable of establishing specific correlation and correspondence links. Therefore, it is correct to affirm that nations, ethnic groups and families, but also industrial or financial corporations, religious congregations, political parties and criminal gangs would be nothing other than intermental networks of family, national, economic, religious, political and criminal beliefs and desires, respectively.

Therefore, the approach of this sociology to any social group is demanding and is oriented to discern, if possible, each of the individuals that make it up, as well as to differentiate the different types of relationships that are established between them. But its ultimate goal is not the individuals and their relationships, but the faith and passion that guide these relationships and intimately communicate these individuals with each other and with themselves. Only by identifying and following these flows in their concrete socio-historical paths, mapping their extensions, measuring their intensities and speeds, describing their dynamics and characteristic effects, will we enter the level of the social itself - which, then, should not be characterized as micro-sociological but as infinitesimal. Also, the singular configurations we call individuals are the result of integration processes of a plethora of social beliefs and desires that have become memory, judgments and personal habits. Moreover, each person is a bio-psycho-social system because of the form of his/her sociogenesis, never entirely coherent nor entirely defined, which is in uninterrupted continuity with the psychosocial field that constitutes it as much as it eliminates it. Far from being the well-defined entity that we like to imagine, every individual functions always interpenetrated with others, transforming it into a vacillating and, in a certain sense, intermittent configuration, which imperceptibly comes and goes, perhaps many times a day. It happens that every individual is intertwined with others by means of two types of imitative processes distinguishable by their intensity and speed, and not by their contents. One is that of the slow and stable repetitions known as institutions and customs; the other is that of the rapid and intense imitations that Tarde calls fashions, and which include the fickle currents of opinion and collective affections, i.e., inter-cerebral.

Thus considered, social life shows itself differentially multiplied in an extraordinary variety of specific human creations that repeat and propagate themselves in imitative series that unfold with the most diverse scopes, as much as they get caught in conflicts or are integrated in new inventions that will branch out creating, in turn, new social worlds. There would then be no such thing as a global and homogeneous society, a coherent and defined system of systems, the continent of all social interactions. What emerges, instead, are associations woven by singular mimetic currents, which are not necessarily coherent among themselves or equally all-encompassing. This happens in such a way that the national association (society) does not coincide with the religious, nor with the economic, scientific, artistic, and so on. Each of these modalities of relation is regulated by distinctive beliefs (or senses) and desires (or ends), whose total concordance in a closed system is not possible —and, at least for Tarde, not desirable either. If units exist, they will be, here as elsewhere, partial, open and variable.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks the editors and reviewers of Universitas for their helpful and constructive comments. He also thanks Martina Lassalle for her valuable comments and corrections.

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