HAL
open science

Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social

Bruno Latour

To cite this version:

Bruno Latour. Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social. Joyce, Patrick. The social in question : new bearings in history and the social sciences, Routledge, pp.117-132, 2002, 9780415231992. hal-01027760

HAL Id: hal-01027760

https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-01027760v1

Submitted on 22 Jul 2014

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social

Bruno Latour,
in Patrick Joyce (edited by) The Social in Question. New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences, Routledge, London, pp.117-132.

> « Le caractère bizarre et grimaçant de la réalité, visiblement déchirée de guerres intestines suivies de boiteuses transactions, suppose la multiplicité des agents du monde. »

a) *Monadologie et sociologie*, p. 93

« Au fond de *on* , en cherchant bien nous ne trouverons jamais qu'un certain nombre de *ils* et de *elles* qui se sont brouillés et confondus en se multipliant. »
Les lois sociales, p.61

b)

In order to contribute to this volume on the "social and its problems", I could have talked about what is known as "actor network theory", or ANT, a deliberate attempt at terminating the use of the word "social" in social theory to replace it with the word "association".1 But I have decided to share with the readers the good news that ANT actually has a forefather, namely Gabriel Tarde, and that, far from being marginalised orphans in social theory, our pet theory benefits from a respectable pedigree.

As is written in the official history of the discipline, Tarde, at the turn of the former century, was the major figure of sociology in France, professor at the

1 For a review of recent discussions, see (Law et Hassard, 1999).

Collège de France, the author of innumerable books, whereas Durkheim was, at the time, a younger, less successful upstart teaching in the province.2 But a few years later, the situation had been completely reversed and Durkheim became the main representant of a scientific discipline of sociology while Tarde had been evacuated in the prestigious but irrelevant position of mere "precursor" —and not a very good one at that, since he had been for ever branded with the sin of 'psychologism' and 'spiritualism'. Since then, main stream social theory has never tired of ridiculing Tarde's achievement and I must confess that I myself never enquired further than the dismissive footnotes of the Durkheimians to check what their rejected 'precursor' had really written.3

And yet, I want to argue in this chapter, through a close reading of his recently republished most daring book, *Monadologie et sociologie* (M&S),4 that Tarde introduced into social theory the two main arguments which ANT has tried, somewhat vainly, to champion:

a) the nature and society divide is irrelevant for understanding the world of human interactions ;

b) the micro/macro distinction stifle any attempt at understanding how society is being generated.

In other words, I want to make a little thought experiment and imagine what the field of social sciences would have become in the last century, had Tarde's insights been turned into a science instead of Durkheim's. Or may be it is that Tarde, a truly daring but also, I have to admit, totally undisciplined mind, needed a rather different century so as to be finally understood. It could be argued that a thinker of networks before their time could not transform his intuitions into data, because the material world he was interested in was not there yet to provide him with any empirical grasp. Things are different now that the technological networks are in place and that many of the argument of Tarde can be turn into sound empirical use.5 Whatever is the case, what I really want to do is to present to social theorists my not totally respectable grandfather... not for the sake of genealogy building, but because, on a few technical points of horrendous difficulty, Tarde possessed the

---

2 (Mucchielli, 1998), for a rather biased rendition of Tarde's work see (Milet, 1970).

3 Tarde maintained a steady constituency in the United States because of his work on imitation, influence and media and has been considered an ancestor of communication studies. But this view has been maintained by completely obliterating his social theory and, above all, his metaphysics.

4 Published as an article in 1893 in *Revue internationale de sociologie* and recently republished as a volume(Tarde, 1999réédition), I will also use some passages of (Tarde, 1999 réédition). For writings in English, see (Tarde, 1969) and *The laws of imitation* which has never often republished.

5 It can be argued that he needed the internet since the possibility of following up interactions in a detailed way has become possible only very recently, see for instance (Rogers et Marres, 1999) which uses, without knowing it, a very tardian methodology.

solution we have been looking in vain for so long.6 It is thus to a portrait of actor-network as a *precursor* of Tarde that I want to devote this paper.

Just to get a flavour of the character and understand why he appealed so much to Gille Deleuze,7 here is how Tarde presented his daring research program in M&S :

''I would naively say : *Hypotheses fingo*. What is dangerous in the sciences, are not close-knit conjectures which are logically followed to their ultimate depths and their ultimate risks ; it is those ghosts of ideas floating in the mind. The point of view of universal sociology is one of those ghosts that is haunting the mind of present day thinkers. Let's see first where it can lead us. Let's us be outrageous even to the risk of passing for raving mad. In those matters, the fear of ridicule would be the most antiphilosophical sentiment.'' p.65i

Is this not a good grandfather the one who encourages you to think through as daringly as possible because there is nothing worse than half-baked 'ghost of ideas' ? Is it not the case that most of the social sciences is made out of those fleeting ghosts, neither theoretical nor concrete, but merely general and abstract ? Instead of establishing sociology on a complete rupture with philosophy, ontology and metaphysics, as Durkheim will be so proud of doing, Tarde goes straight at them and reclaims as his duty to connect social theory with bold assumptions about the furniture of the world itself. The reader begins to understand, I hope, why Tarde had not a chance in 1900 and why I am so thrilled to feel his genes acting in me, since I have never been able to decide whether I was a metaphysician or a sociologist. If I use extended quotes for this chapter, it is so as to provide his ideas with another chance to spread…

The strange specificity of human assemblages

The shock of reading S&M begins with the very first pages since instead of talking about « the social » as a specific domain of human symbolic order, Tarde begins with a research agenda, everywhere on the rise in the sciences, according to him, and that he calls *monadology* : « The monads, Leibniz' daughters, have come a long way since their father » p.32, he states in the first sentence of the book, just after having repeated in the exergue *Hypotheses fingo*. We are indeed very far from Durkheim. What is a monad ? It is the stuff out of which the universe is built. But

---

6 Mucchielli in a damning article against 'Tardomania' (Mucchielli, 2000)resents this use of an author who should be dead since, he argues, we are separated from them by such an infinite distance. But I don't share Mucchielli's historicism and consider that the best way to deal with dead authors is to resurrect them as if they were alive today to help us to think.

7 Who benefitted much more from Tarde than is visible in the long note in (Deleuze, 1968) p. 104.

it is a strange stuff, since monads are not material entity only since they are *possessed* by faith and desire —the verb 'possess', as we shall see at the end, takes a great importance in Tarde.

No spiritualism nor idealism to expect from this affirmation though, since monads are also completely materialist : they are guided by no superior goal, no grand design, no *telos*. Each of them, much like Richard Dawkins's genes or Susan Blackmore memes, fights for its own privately envisioned goal.8 Finally, monads lead to a thoroughly reductionist version of metaphysics since the small always holds the key to the understanding of the big. "The main objection against the theory of monads, is that (…) it puts, or seems to put, as much or even more, complexity at the basis of phenomena that at their summit" p.69.

But, here again, Tarde offers a very odd type of reductionism since the smallest entities are always richer in difference and complexity than their aggregates or that the superficial appearances that we observe from far away. For a reason we will understand later, the small is always also the most complex : "[the atom] is a milieu that is *universal* or that aspires to becomes such, a universe *in itself,* not only a *microcosmos*, as Leibniz intended, but the cosmos conquered in its entirety and absorbed by a single being" p.57 (his underline). Or even more tellingly : "In the bosom of each thing, there reside every other thing real and possible" p.58.

It is with this bizarre arrangement of apparently contradictory metaphysics that we have to familiarise ourselves if we want to understand why Tarde had so completely ended the social —or refused to begin with it.9

In the same way as Tarde refuses to take society as a higher, more complex, order than the individual monad, he refuses to take the individual human agent as the real stuff out of which society is made : a brain, a mind, a soul, a body is itself composed of myriad's of 'little persons', or agencies, each of them endowed with faith and desire, and actively promoting one's total version of the world. Agency plus influence and imitation, is exactly what has been called, albeit with different words, an actor-network. The link of the two ideas is essential to understand his theory : it is because he is a reductionist —even of a strange sort— that he does not respect any border between nature and society, and because he does not stop at the border between physics, biology and sociology that he does not believe in explaining the lower levels by the higher levels. Such is the key difficulty : human societies are not specific in the sense that they would be symbolic, or made of

---

8 (Blackmore, 1999) does not mention Tarde which is very unfair since mimetics is a simplifed version of monadology. Tarde, for instance, would never make the mistake of distinguishing genes from memes. See a paper on Tarde in the Marsden, P. (2000). Forefathers of Memetics: Gabriel Tarde and the Laws of Imitation. Journal of Memetics - Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission (http://www.cpm.mmu.ac.uk/jom-emit/2000/vol4/marsden_p.html),

9 This is very close from the notion of *entelechy* or actant I have developped in (Latour, 1988) unfortunately without the benefit of Tarde.

individual, or due to the existence of a macro organisations. They seem specific *to us* for no other reasons that, first, we see them from the inside and, second, that they are composed of few elements compared to any of the other societies we grasp only from the outside.

Let's get slowly here : to begin with, we have to understand that 'society' is a word that can be attributed to *any* association :

" But this means that every thing is a society and that all things are societies. And it is quite remarkable that science, by a logical sequence of its earlier movements, tend to strangely generalise the notion of society. It speaks of cellular societies, why not of atomic societies ? not to mention societies of stars, solar systems. All of the sciences seem fated to become branches of sociology.''p.58.ii

Instead of saying, like Durkheim, that we ''should treat social facts as a thing'', Tarde says that ''all things are society'', and any phenomenon is a social fact. Nothing extraordinary nor imperialistic here : this does not mean, as with Auguste Comte, that sociology has to occupy the throne to rule over the sciences, but simply that every science has to deal with assemblages of many interlocking monads. The expression 'plant sociology' has existed long before human sociology ; 'société stellaire' or 'atomique' is an expression one will find often in Whitehead ; Bergson, the successor of Tarde at the Collège de France, would feel perfectly at ease with this sentence, and so would contemporary specialists in 'mimetics' although in a completely different context. Tarde's idea is simply that if there is something special in human society it is not be determined *by any strong opposition* with all the other types of aggregates and certainly not by some special sort of arbitrarily imposed symbolic order which will put it apart from « mere matter ». To be a society of monads is a totally general phenomenon, it is the stuff out of which the world is made. There is nothing especially new in the human realm.

So where does the specificity of *human* societies come from ? From two very odd features : if there is one privilege we have when talking about human societies is that we see them from the inside out so to speak. ''When one reaches human societies (…) we feel at home, we are the true components of those coherent systems of persons called cities or states, regiments or congregations. We know everything that happens inside''p.68. Thus we can easily check that for the only aggregate we know well, no emergent superorganism takes over from the mesh of competing monads. This is the most clearly anti-spencerian as well as anti-durkheimian argument and we have to quote it at length to get the point right :

"But, no matter how intimate, how harmonious a social group is, never do we see emerging *ex abrupto*, in the midst of its astonished associates, a *collective self*, which would be real and not only metaphoric, a sort of marvellous result, of which the associates would be the mere conditions. To be sure, there is always an

associate that represents and personifies the group in its entirety, or else a small number of associates (the ministers in a State) who, each under a particular aspect, individualise in themselves the group in its entirety. But this leader, or those leaders, are always also members of that group, born from their own fathers and mothers and not born collectively from their subjects or their constituency. Why would it be the case that the agreement of unconscious nervous cells would be able to evoke out of nothing the brain of an embryo, while the agreement of conscious human beings never would have had this capacity in any social group ?'' p. 68iii

The argument is so radical that any one in her right mind will recoil from it, but don't forget the motto of Tarde's epistemology : the fear of ridicule is not a philosophical virtue. The only reason we believe in emergent properties for the brain of an embryo is because we don't see the aggregates it links together from the inside. But in the case of human societies, we know for sure that there exist no *moi collectif* since the representant is never a Leviathan, like Hobbes's 'mortal god', but is always, one of us, born from a mother and father an simply able to 'individualise the group in him or herself'. If there is no macro society in human group, there is none anywhere. Or to put it in an even more counter-intuitive way : the smaller is always the bigger entity there is.

To make sense of it, we have to add the other feature that makes human society apart, which appears even queerer at first : those assemblages are not only seen from the inside, they are also made of very few elements, compared to all the other societies. A polyp, a brain, a stone, a gas, a star, are made of much vaster collections of monads than human societies. In a hilarious moment, Tarde compares the biggest human society of his time, China, with any one of the others. What is a society made of only 300 millions of elements (the size of China at the time) ? ''An organism that would contain such a limited number of *basic* anatomic components would be inevitably located in the lowest degrees of vegetality and animality'' p.64 (all underlines in quotes are his) ! Any brain is made of more than 300 million aggregates, any speck of dust, any microliter of gas. For most of the societies we consider we have only statistical information averaging out billions of interactions, so we tend to find obvious that for them there is a huge gap between the atomic element and the macroscopic phenomenon. But not for human societies which are made of so few entities : for those, to which we pertain, we know for sure that every single macro factor is made out of determined pathways for which there exist thoroughly empirical traces. No one, in human society can come and claim that, in order to go from one interaction to the next, you have to shift scale and go through a Society or any such Big Animal. Since for the only case we know well, human societies, the small holds the big, it must be the same, Tarde argues, for all the others, except we don't have the slightest idea on how to reach the monad levels of stones, gas and particles without changing scales. We embrace them only statistically.

The macro is nothing but a slight extension of the micro

We are so used in the social sciences to speak of levels of complexities, of higher order, of emergent properties, of macrostructure, of culture, societies, classes, nation states, that no matter how many times we hear the argument, we immediately forget it and starts ranking local interactions from the smallest to the biggest as if we could not think without stuffing Russian dolls one neatly into the next.10 But Tarde is heterarchic through and through. The big, the whole, the great, is not superior to the monads, it is only a simpler, more standardised, version of *one of the monad's goal which has succeeded in making part of its view shared by the others*. ''Those beautiful coordinations (such as the Civil Codexx) must have been conceived before being put to execution ; they must have begun to exist only as a few ideas hidden in a few cerebral cells before covering an immense territory'', he writes in *Les Lois sociales* (a slightly more disciplined and better composed book published in 1898) p. 116.11 Tarde is so completely reductionist than even the standardisation —so typical of macroscopic effect— is always brought back to the influence of one element from below —but 'below' is of course not the right metaphor.

Here again we should go slowly. The first difficulty is to grasp how the big manages not to emerge out of the small but to foreground some of its features. Tarde's answer appears pretty strange at first :

''If we look at the [human] social world, the only one we know from the *inside*, we see the agents, the humans, much more differentiated, much more individually characterised, much richer in continuous variations, than the governmental apparatus, the system of laws and beliefs, even the dictionaries and the grammars which are maintained through their activities. An historical fact is simpler and clearer that any mental state of any of the actors [participating in it]'' p.69iv

As in Stendhal's novel, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Fabrice in Waterloo fills a more complex world than the whole history of the battle that Napoleon has waged —and lost, as any Eurostar commuter like me knows too well… Tarde can be said to have invented microhistory many decades before its discoverers, in the same way as he has invented ANT long before we had any inkling of what a network looked like when he wrote in *Les lois sociales* (from now on LS) this stunning research program **:**

---

10 I have tried it many times from a paper in (Callon et Latour, 1981) to a photographic essay (Latour et Hermant, 1998) without succeeding in making sociologists convinced of the point. Ethnomethodologists have also failed, being always brought back to a 'micro' definition of their method in spite of their clear commitment to study 'macro' building sites with the same eyes as 'micro' (Hilbert, 1990).

11 (Tarde, 1999 réédition)

"In general, there is more logic in a sentence than in a talk, in a talk than in a sequence or group of talks ; there is more logic in a special ritual than in a whole credo ; in an article of law than in a whole code of laws, in a specific scientific theory than in the whole body of a science; there is more logic in each piece of work executed by an artisan than in the totality of his behaviour." p. 115 LSv

He goes so far, in his reductionism —or reverse reductionism since the small is always more complex— that in S&M he uses the same argument on language, the holy place of structuralist explanations, the only indisputable case where the difference between *langue* and *parole* should be obvious —but not for him. "People who speak, all with different accents, intonations, pitches, voices, gestures : here is the social element, the true chaos of discordant heterogeineities. But on the long run, from this confusing Babel, a few general habits will be outlined which can be formulated in grammatical laws." p.74 (if not otherwise mentioned all quotes are from M&S). Against any argument in terms of structure beyond or beneath speech acts, Tarde imagines a kind of sociolinguistics, of pragmatics absolutely opposite, in which the structure is only *one* of the simplified, routinized, repetitive element of *one* of the locutors who has managed to include his or her local tradition into the general idiom.12 And there is nothing wrong with this standardisation and extension, since it will immediately allows the monads to *differ* again, as he immediately adds continuing the sentence above :

"In turn, those [grammatical laws] since they allow many more locutors to speak together, will help them to find a specific turn of phrase : yet another kind of discordances. And those laws will succeed all the more so in diversifying the minds that they will have been better fixed and more uniform." p.74vi

Macro features are so provisional and have so little ability to rule over the occurrences that they only manage to serve as an *occasion* for more differences to be generated ! Instead of a structure of language acting through our speech acts, the more structural elements float around in the shape of grammars, dictionary, exemplars, the more they will allow speech acts to differ from one another ! Nowhere has the branch of pragmatics dared moving so far as to say that the structure of language is *one* speech act among billions of others, a coordination tool that pushes even further the proliferation of differing locutions.

The treatment reserved for language, gives an idea of what Tarde is going to do for the social. Instead of moving from, let's say, Goffman to Parsons, when going from face to face interactions to 'bigger' social structure, Tarde keeps the same method for all the levels —there are no levels anyway. Another long quote is

---

12 Ethnomethodology and the pragmatics that has come out of it would be today the only field of linguistics as daring as that : no structure, but lots of locally produced structuring effects without privilege over speech acts.

necessary here, so odd is the argument at first. To get it, the reader should remember that the big is never more than the simplification of *one* element of the small :

"'Let's insist on this crucial truth : we are led to it when we remark that, in each of those vast regular mechanisms —the social, the vital, the stellar, the molecular— all the internal revolts that succeed in breaking them are provoked by an analogous condition : their components, soldiers of those various regiments, provisional incarnations of their laws, pertain to them by one side only, but through the other sides, they escape from the world they constitute. This world would not exist without them ; but they would subsist without it. The attributes each element owes to its incorporation in its regiment do not form its entire nature ; it has other leanings, other instincts coming from previous enrolments ; and some which are coming from its own store, from its own proper substance, to fight against the collective power, of which it is a part, but which is only an artificial being, made only of sides and facades of beings."p. 80vii

Extraordinary picture of a social order constantly threatened by immediate decomposition because no component is fully part of it. Every monad overspills the artificial being of any 'superior' order, having lend for allowing its existence only a tiny part, a *facade* of itself ! You can enrol some *sides* of the monads, but you can never dominate them. Revolt, resistance, break down, conspiracy, alternative is everywhere. Doesn't have one the impression of reading Deleuze and Guattari *Mille Plateaux* ? The social is not the whole, but a part, and a fragile one at that !

Understandably, no position can be further from the professional reflex of the social sciences. As Tarde explains with some passion in *Les lois sociales* :

"It is always the same mistake that is put forward : to believe that in order to see the regular, orderly, logical pattern of social facts, you have to extract yourself from their details, basically irregular, and to go upward until you embrace vast landscapes panoramically ; that the principal source of any social co-ordination resides in a few very general facts out of which it falls by degree until it reaches the particulars, but in a weakened form ; to believe in short that while man agitates himself, a law of evolution leads him. I believe exactly the opposite." p. 114 LSviii

To be a good sociologist one should refuse to go up, to take a larger view, to compile huge vistas ! Look down, you sociologists. Be even more blind, even more narrow, even more down to earth, even more myopic. Am I not right in invoking him as my grand father ? Is he not asking us to join what I have called 'oligopticon' instead of panoptica ? Is he not advocating what I have called the 'flat society' argument ? The 'big picture', the one that is provided by this typical gesture of

sociologists drawing with their hands in the air a shape no bigger than a pumpkin,13 is always simpler and more localised than the myriad of monads it expresses only in part : it could not be without them, but without it, they would still be something. Far from being the *milieu in which* human grow and live, the social is only a tiny set of narrow standardised connections which occupies only some of the monads some of the times, on the condition that their metrology be strictly enforced and upkept before being inevitable broken up by the inner resistance of the pullutation of infinitesimal actants. As soon as you leave those tiny networks, you are no longer in the social, but down in a confusing 'plasma' composed of myriad of monads, a chaos, a brew, that social scientists will do everything to avoid staring in the eyes.14

There was no way, it should be clear by now, that Durkheim and Tarde could reconcile their view of the social even though they agree to criticise Spencer. They both believe that his biological metaphors are useless to understand human societies, but for totally different reasons. Durkheim fights Spencers because the *sui generis* human society is irreducible to biological organisms. Tarde fights Spencer, because there exist no organism anyway : since all organisms are societies, human societies cannot be an organism and certainly not a superorganism. This common rejection does not mean that our two forefathers agree, because of an argument that Durkheimians, to these days, have never forgiven Tarde for making : they have simply taken the *explanandum* for the *explanans*. Tarde expresses his surprise at Durheim's uses of the word sociology with great politeness but a devastating irony when he writes in LS :

"[My conception], in brief, is almost the reverse of that of Mr Durkheim. Instead of explaining everything by the so called imposition of a *law of evolution* which would constrain larger phenomena to reproduce, to repeat themselves in some certain identical order, instead of explain the *small* by the *large*, the *detail* by the *big*, I explain the overall similarities by the accumulation of elementary actions, the large by the small, the big by the detail" p.63 LSix

It is not only the case that Durkheim has taken society as the cause instead of seeing that it is never more than a highly provisional consequence used as a mere occasion for monads to differentiate yet again, he also has made, according to Tarde, the more damning mistake of *distinguishing* the social laws from the agents *acted* by those laws. "We have just seen that the evolution of sociology has led it, here as elsewhere, to descend from the fanciful heights of vague and grandiose causes to the infinitesimal actions which are both real and precise." p. 118 LS. As we saw in the quote a few pages back, Tarde cannot believe that 'while man agitates himself a law of evolution leads him'. There is no law in social theory that

13 On the 'big picture' that is never bigger than the small see (Latour, 1988).

14 On plasma in addition to (LatouretHermant, 1998) see (Didier, 2001).

could differ from the monads themselves. It is this distinction between a law and what is subject to the law, no matter how obvious it is for the rest of the social sciences, that Tarde has dismantled with his monadology. This complete shift in the epistemology is the last, but also the most arduous, point I want to tackle in this chapter. But before getting his argument right, we have to understand why he too has made the study of science central to his argument in social theory.

Science studies as the test bed of social theory

When Tarde wishes to present the best case of what he has in mind when analysing human societies, it is always history of science that comes forward. He puts science studies dead in the centre of social theory, a good 80 years before it was invented ! Is the reader now convinced that he is our ancestor and that I am not making up this genealogy simply out of fear of embracing an orphan theory ? For all the other aspects of human societies, the paths that leads a monad to its spread (we would say the actor and its network) may be lost or erased through custom and habits. There is one exception however, which makes it the most telling example for social theory, and that is the way scientific practice goes from one tiny brain in an isolated laboratory all the way to become the race's common sense. The tracability of science is complete :15

"As to the scientific monument, probably the most grandiose of all the human monuments, there is no possible doubt. It has been built in the full light of history and we can follow its development almost from its first inception until today. (…) Everything in it finds its origin in individual action, not only the raw material, but also the overall views, the detailed floor plans as well as the master plans ; every thing, even what is now spread in all the cultivated brains and taught in primary schools, has begun in the secret of a solitary brain." p.125 LSx

In the same way that no one can claim that society is bigger than the monads for the human society we see from the inside, no one can claim for history of science that there exist a *Zeitgeist* somewhere, or a culture that could explain (away) why any innovation has spread from one place to the next. We might not be able to document all the moves making the human society coherent through influence, imitation, contamination and routinisation, but we can document it for the unique case of history of science since we benefits from the high quality tools of what we would call nowadays scientometrics.

---

15 This is why the internet seems to me such a tardian technology : it allows any rumour, any news, any piece of information, any buying and selling to become as precisely tracable as science was a century ago through the writing of papers and reports and the careful web of references and quotations. This is one other case of the general scientificisation of societies.

"When a young farmer, facing the sun set, does not know if he should believe his school master asserting that the fall of the day is due to the movement of the earth and not of the sun, or if he should accept as witness his senses that tell him the opposite, in this case, there is one imitative ray, which, through his school master, ties him to Galileo. No matter what, it is enough for his hesitation,16 his internal strive, to find its origin in the social." p.87-88. LSxi

We should not be put off by the notion of an 'imitative ray'. Tarde's vocabulary is a bit odd, but any reader of mimetics can replace imitative ray by any other more modern metaphor about mutation, kinship selection, reproductive strategy and the like. We may also use the notion of an actor-network to account for the tie between Galileo's discovery and the farm boy's hesitation. Nor should we be worried that we have traded a sociological theory for a psychological version, as if Tarde was appealing to *individual* scientists as innovators to make his point. Although this is what Durkheimians have tried to make him say, no sociology was ever further from psychology than Tarde's.17 How can one make the author of this stunning sentence the ancestor of methodological individualism ? "In any *one*, if we look carefully, we will find nothing but a certain number of *he* and *she* that have blurred and confounded themselves through their multiplications" p. 61 LS. Exactly as in ANT, whenever you want to understand a network, go look for the actors, but when you want to understand an actor go look through the net the work it has traced. In both cases, the point is to avoid the passage through the vague notion of society. This is why the word 'scientific genius' takes under his pen a very strange meaning : we are suddenly faced with a complete redistribution of agencies into a myriad not only of other scientists, but also of brain states !

"What does it mean for us to say that any psychic activity is linked to bodily apparatus ? Only that in a society, no one may act socially, may reveal itself in any specific way without the collaboration of a great many other individuals, most of the time ignored. The obscure workers who, by the accumulation of tiny facts, have prepared the apparition of a great scientific theory by a Newton, a Cuvier, a Darwin, are making up in some sense the organisms of which those geniuses are the souls ; and their work is nothing but the cerebral vibrations of which this theory is the consciousness. Consciousness here means *cerebral glory*, in some way, of the most influential and the most powerful part of the brain. Left to itself, a monad can do nothing." p. 66xii

---

16 Hesitation is of the key element in Tarde's sociology especially well developped in a stunning book on the anthropology of economics (Tarde, 1902).

17 He is always very careful in making the distinction between intra-psychology the ones he *does not* deal with, and interpsychology which is a synonymous for sociology. The reason why he uses this expression is exactly the same as the one that forced us to use the expression actor-network to avoid the agent/structure dichotomy.

And this is the man who has been charged with the sin of psychologism, individualism and, even worse, spiritualism ! The one who dare reducing Newton's mechanisms to the '*gloire cérébrale*' of some brain states ! Even Richard Dawkins, a militant defender of Allan Sokal's epistemology, has not dared reducing his innovations to the mutations of some parts of his brains fighting for supremacy :

"This is why any social production having some marked characteristics, be it an industrial good, a verse, a formula, a political idea, which has appeared one day somewhere in the corner of a brain, dreams like Alexander of conquering the world, tries to multiply itself by thousands and millions of copies in every place where there exist human beings and will never stop except if it is kept in check by some rival production as ambitious as itself."p. 96xiii

« To have or not to have, that *is* the question… »

It is at this point that Tarde's epistemology begins really to pay off. As is clear from the last quote, the agencies to deal with, the ones we really have to consider if we wish to explain something are neither human agents nor social structures, but the monads themselves in their efforts to constitute unstable aggregates, what we would call actants or world-building *entelechies*. Science is not what allows us to *study* the monads from the outside, as if we were finding the laws of their behaviour, but *one of the ways* in which they spread and make sense of their world-building activity. Contrary to Leibniz's monads, they are not connected by any preestablished harmony, and of course for Tarde, there is no God to hold together or pacify his specific sort of metaphysical Darwinism.18

'(Leibniz) had to invent preestablished harmony, and for the same reason, materialists have to invoke, as complement of their erratic and blinds atoms, universal laws or the unique formula to which all those laws could be reduced, a sort of mystical commandment to whom all beings would obey and which would emanate from no being whatsoever, sort of ineffable and unintelligible verb which, without having ever been uttered by anyone, would nonetheless be listened to always and everywhere." p. 56xiv

In this extraordinary sentence, Tarde sends both materialists and spiritualists to the drawing board, since they both make the distinction between the actions of the

18 And needless to say that Tarde would make mincemeat of the liberal economics projected by mimeticians onto genetics and cultures in order to decide what constitutes a success. To spread your definition of what constitutes success is *one* of the metaphysical controversies for which monads compete. In here as elsewhere, he is more Darwinian than the neo-darwinians.

agent and the laws that act on those agents. To speak of laws of nature that would preside over the activity of blind atoms, is even more spiritualist than to endow those atoms with some will and purposes, since it implies that those laws are 'listening to' and 'obey to' some voice over which has never been 'uttered by any one'. Materialists believe in 'mystical commandment' because their epistemology divorces science from what actants themselves do when they try to make sense of their own aggregations.

In a way, a good thirty years before Whitehead, Tarde tries to find a solution to the 'bifurcation of nature'.19 Instead of having two vocabularies, one for the agent and one for the causes that make the agents act, one can do with only one, on the condition of allowing the agent to concentrate the whole under some sort of point of view or folding :20 as I have already quoted, a monad is ''a universe *in itself,* not only a *microcosmos*, as Leibiniz intended, but the cosmos conquered in its entirety and absorbed by a single being'' p.57. The sciences —or more exactly the collective theories acting of their own by propagation from brain states to brain states— are also launching themselves to this conquest, but in so doing they don't write down the laws of nature, they *add* more differences to it. ''In the bosom of each thing, there reside every other thing real and possible'' p.58

We may now be better equipped to grasp this sentence of *Monadologie et sociologie* which was going to have so much influence on Deleuze :

''To exist is to differ ; difference, in one sense, is the substantial side of things, what they have most in common and what makes them most different. One has to start from this difference and to abstain from trying to explain it, especially by starting with identity, as so many persons wrongly do. Because identity is a minimum and, hence, a type of difference, and a very rare type at that, in the same way as rest is a type of movement and the circle a type of ellipse. To begin with some primordial identity implies at the origin a prodigiously unlikely singularity, or else the obscure mystery of one simple being then dividing for no special reason.'' p. 73xv

But what is going to be the bridge allowing one to go from one difference to the next ? Identity is ruled out. What then ? *Possession* ! In one of the most important sentence of his work, Tarde remarks almost in passing :

''So far, all of philosophy has been founded on the verb *To be*, whose definition seemed to have been the Rosetta's stone to be discovered. One may say that, if

---

19 (Whitehead, 1920) in a difficult but essential book has taken again the same problem as that of the farm boy faced with two contradictory interpretations of the same sunset : For the key notion of event, see (Whitehead, 1929 1978).

20 For the notion of fold with special reference to Leibniz, see (Deleuze, 1988) translated as (Deleuze, 1993).

only philosophy had been founded on the verb *To have*, many sterile discussions, many slowdown of the mind, would have been avoided. From this principle 'I am', it is impossible to deduce any other existence than mine, in spite of all the subtleties of the world. But affirm first this postulate : 'I have' as the basic fact, and then the *had* as well as the *having* are given at the same time as inseparable''p. 86xvi

Here goes Hamlet, as well as Descartes with his *cogito*, Heidegger with his Being *qua* Being, together with thousand of homelies about the superiority of what 'we are' above what 'we have'. Quite the opposite, Tarde instructs us. Nothing is more sterile than identity philosophy —not to mention identity politics— but possession philosophy —and may be possession politics ?— create solidarity and attachments that cannot be matched. ''For thousands of years, people have catalogued the many ways of beings, the many kinds of beings, and no one ever had the idea of cataloguing the various kinds, the various degrees of possession. Yet, possession is the universal fact, and there is no better term than that of 'acquisition' to express the formation and the growth of any being'' p. 89. If *essence* is the way to define an entity within the 'To be' philosophy, for the 'To have' philosophy an entity is defined by its *properties* and also by its *avidity*… No way to escape from Tarde's logic : take any monad, if you look at what are its properties and its proprietors, you will be led to define the whole cosmos, which would be impossible if you had only tried to define the essence of an isolated identity.

This rejection of the philosophy of identity has one final consequence, which is of course crucial for us ANT sociologists : the status of non-humans, for which we have been so often criticised. The crossing of the boundary between humans and non humans has raised many problems for our readers and is often taken as the touchstone on which our social theory should stand or fall. But Tarde offers, a hundred years in advance, a much sturdier solution to this problem, when he shifts attention from essences to properties. ''The whole outside universe is composed of souls different from mine, but, in effect, similar to mine'' p.44. This is not, in spite of the word 'soul' a spiritualist argument, but only a way of ending an hypocrisy that claims to say what non-humans *are* —their identity— and abstaining meticulously from saying what they *want* —their avidity, possession or properties. After Descartes, here goes Kant and his thing in itself.

''Accepting to say that we don't know *the being in itself of a stone*, of a plant, and, at the same time to continue saying that they *are*, is logically inconsistent ; the idea that we form of those entities, it is easy to show it, has for content our mental states, and since, if we empty those mental states, there is nothing left, either we say nothing more than this content when we affirm the existence of that unknowable substantial X, or we are in fact forced to confess that in pretending to say something else, we are saying nothing at all. But if the entity in itself is similar, in effect, to our own being, it can be affirmed since it is no longer unknowable''p44xvii.

The logical impossibility that has been so vehemently reproached to ANT scholars —how can you impute will and belief to scallops, microbes, door closers, rocks, cars and instruments when it is always you the humans that does the talking— finds in Tarde a radical but healthy solution : if you don't want to share avidity and belief with the things you have, then *also stop to say what they are*. The accusation is upturned and the burden of proof shifted to the accusators. Abstain from the ridiculous solution to say that things exist in themselves but that you cannot know them. Either you talk or you remain silent. But you cannot possibly speak and say that the things you speak about are not in some ways similar to you : they express through you a sort of difference that has *you*, the speaker, as one of their proprietors. What looks like an impossibility with the philosophy of identity, offers no difficulty with the philosophy of 'alteration'. Possession is another way of talking about translation.

After this too brief presentation of some of Tarde's arguments in the metaphysics of social theory, we may now understand why so much of ANT appears difficult, and why Tarde's tradition has remained so far without real descendance : sociologists don't want to be *had*.

Blackmore Susan (1999), *The Meme Machine*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Callon Michel et Bruno Latour (1981), "Unscrewing the Big Leviathans How Do Actors Macrostructure Reality", in Knorr, Karin et Aron Cicourel (Knorr, Karin et Aron Cicourel), *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology. Toward an Integration of Micro and Macro Sociologies,* London, Routledge, p. 277-303.

Deleuze Gilles (1968), *Différence et répétition*, Paris, PUF.

Deleuze Gille (1988), *Le Pli. Leibniz et le Baroque*, Paris, Minuit.

Deleuze Gille (1993), *The Fold. Leibnitz and the Baroque (translated by Tom Conley)*, Athlone Press.

Didier Emmanuel (2001), *De l'échantillon à la population. Thèse de doctorat.*, Paris Ecole des mines, Thèse de doctorat.

Hilbert Richard A. (1990), "Ethnomethodology and the Micro-Macro Order", *American Sociological Review*, vol. 55, p. 794-808.

Latour Bruno (1988), *Irreductions part II of The Pasteurization of France*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press.

Latour Bruno (1988), "A Relativist Account of Einstein's Relativity", *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 18, p. 3-44.

Latour Bruno et Emilie Hermant (1998), *Paris ville invisible*, Paris, La Découverte-Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond.

Law John et John Hassard, (Law John et John Hassard) (1999), *Actor Network and After*, Oxford, Blackwell.

Milet Jean (1970), *Gabriel Tarde et la philosophie de l'histoire*, Paris, Vrin.

Mucchielli Laurent (1998), *La Découverte du social. Naissance de la sociologie en France*, Paris, La Découverte.

Mucchielli Laurent (2000), "Tardomania? Réflexions sur les usages contemporains de Tarde", *Revue d'histoire des sciences humaines*, vol. (3), p. 161-184.

Rogers Richard et Noortje Marres (1999), "Landscapping Climate Change: Mapping Science & technology Debates on the World Wibe Web", *Public*

Understanding of Science, vol. , p.

Tarde Gabriel (1902), *Psychologie économique*, Paris, Félix Alcan.

Tarde Gabriel (1969), *On Communication and Social Influence. Selected Papers. Edited by Terry N. Clark*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Tarde Gabriel (1999 réédition), *Les lois sociales*, Paris, Les empêcheurs de penser en rond.

Tarde Gabriel (1999réédition), *Monadologie et sociologie*, Paris, Les empêcheurs de penser en rond.

Whitehead Alfred North (1920), *Concept of Nature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Whitehead Alfred North (1929 1978), *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology*, New York, Free Press.

---

i " *Hypotheses fingo*, dirais-je naïvement. Ce qu'il y a de dangereux dans les sciences, ce ne sont pas les conjectures serrées de près, logiquement suivies jusqu'aux dernières profondeurs ou aux derniers précipices ; ce sont les fantomes d'idées à l'état flottant dans l'esprit. Le point de vue sociologique universel me semble être un de ces spectres qui hantent le cerveau de nos contemporains spéculatifs. Voyons dés l'abord où il doit nous mener. Soyons outranciers au risque de passer pour extravagants. En cette manière spécialement, la crainte du ridicule serait le plus antiphilosophique des sentiments. " p. 65

ii Mais cela suppose d'abord que toute est chose est une société, que tout phénomène est un fait social. Or, il est remarquable que la science tend, par une suite logique d'ailleurs de ses tendances précédentes, à généraliser étrangement la notion de société. Elle nous parle de sociétés animales de sociétés cellulaires, pourquoi pas de sociétés atomiques ? j'allais oublier les sociétés d'astres, les systèmes solaires et stellaires. Toutes les sciences semblent destinées à devenir des branches de la sociologie. "

iii * 'Or, si intime, si harmonieux que soit un groupe social quelconque, jamais nous n'y voyons jaillir *ex abrupto* au milieu des associés surpris un *moi collectif*, réel et non simplement métaphorique, résultat merveilleux dont ils seraient les conditions. Sans doute il y a toujours un associé qui représente et personnifie le groupe tout entier ou un bien un petit nombre d'associés (les ministres dans un Etat) qui, chacun sous un aspect particulier, l'individualisent en eux non moins entièrement. Mais ce chef ou ces chefs sont toujours aussi des membres du groupe, nés de leur père et mère et non de leurs sujets ou de leurs administrés collectivement. Pourquoi cependant l'accord de cellules nerveuses inconscientes aurait-il le don journellement d'évoquer du néant une conscience dans un cerveau d'embryon, tandis que l'accord de consciences humains n'aurait jamais eu cette vertu dans une société quelconque ?"

iv "Si nous regardons le monde social, le seul qui nous soit connu *en dedans*, nous voyons les agents, les hommes, beaucoup plus différenciés, plus caractérisés individuellement, plus riches en variation continuelles, que le mécanisme gouvernemental, les systèmes de lois ou de croyance, les dictionnaires mêmes et les grammaires, entretenus par leur concours. Un fait historique est plus simple, plus clair que n'importe quel état d'esprit d'un de ses acteurs".

v « Il y a en général, plus de logique dans une phrase que dans un discours, dans une discours que dans une suite ou un groupe de discours ; il y en a plus dans un rite spécial que dans tout un credo ; dans un article de loi que dans tout un code, dans une théorie scientifique particulière que dans tout un corps de science ; il y en a plus dans chaque travail exécuté par un ouvrier que dans l'ensemble de sa conduite. »

vi « A leur tour, celles-ci ne servent par la mise en relations d'un plus grand nombre de parleurs ensemble, qu'à mettre en relief la tournure propre de leurs idées: autre genre de discordance. Et elles réussissent d'autant mieux à diversifier les esprits qu'elles sont elles-mêmes plus fixes et plus uniformes."

vii Insistons sur cette vérité capitable : on s'y achemine en remarquant que, dans chacun de ces grands mécanismes réguliers, le mécanisme social, mécanisme vital, le mécanisme stellaire, le mécanisme moléculaire, toutes les révoltes internes qui finissent par les briser sont provoquées par une condition analogue : leurs éléments composants, soldats de ces divers régiments, incarnation temporaire de leurs lois, n'appartiennent jamais que par un côté de leut être, et par d'autres côtés échappent, au monde qu'ils constituent. Ce monde n'existerait pas sans eux ; mais sans lui ils seraient encore quelque chose. Les attributs que chaque élément doit à son incorporation dans son régiment ne forment pas sa nature tout entière ; il a d'autres penchants, d'autres instincts qui lui viennent d'enrégimentations différentes ; d'autres enfin, par suite, qui lui viennent de son fonds, de lui-même, de sa substance propre et fondamentale sur laquelle il peut s'appuyer pour lutter contre

la puissance collective, dont il fait partie, et qui n'est qu'un être artificiel, composé de côtés et de façades d'êtres.
viii « C'est toujours la même erreur qui se fait jour : celle de croire que, pour voir peu à peu apparaître la régularité, l'ordre, la marche logique, dans les faits sociaux, il faut sortir de leur détail, essentiellement irrégulier, et s'élever très haut jusqu'à embrasser d'une vue panoramique de vastes ensembles ; que le principe et la souce de toute coordination sociale réside dans quelques fait très général d'où elle descend par degré jusqu'aux faits particuliers, mais en s'affaiblissant singulièrement, et qu'en somme l'homme s'agite mais une loi de l'évolution le mène. Je crois le contraire en quelque sorte. »
ix « cette conception, en somme, est presque l'inverse (…) de M. Durkheim : Au lieu d'expliquer tout par la prétendue imposition d'une *loi d'évolution* qui contraidnrait les phénomènes d'ensemble à se reproduire, à se répéter identiquement dans un certain ordre, au lieu d'epxliquer le *petit* par le *grand*, le *détail* par le *gros*, j'explique les similitudes d'ensemble par l'entassement de petites actions élémentaires, le grand par le petit, le gros par le détail. »
x « Quant au monument scientiifque, le plus grandiose peut-être de tous les monuments humains, il n'y a pas de doute possible. Celui-là s'est édifié à la pleine lumière de l'histoire, et nous suivons son développement à peu près depuis ses débuts jusqu'à nos jours. (…) Tout est là d'origine individuelle,non seulement tous les matériaux, mais les plans, les plans de détail et les plans d'ensemble ; tout, même ce qui est maintenant répandu dans tous les cerveaux cultivés et enseigné à l'école primate, a débuté par être le secret d'un cerveau solitaire (…) »
xi * « Mais quand un jeune paysan, devant un coucher de soleil, ne sait s'il doit croire la parole de son maître d'école qui lui assure que la chute du jour est dûe à un mouvement de la terre et non du soleil, ou le témoignage de ses sens qui lui dit le contraire, dans ce cas, il n'y a qu'un seul rayon imitatif, qui, par son maître d'école, le rattache à Galilée. N'importe, cela suffit pour que son hésitation, son opposition interne et individuelle, soit sociale par sa cause.»
xii « A notre point de vue que signifie cette grande vérité, que toute activité psychique est liée au fonctionnement d'un appareil corporel ? Elle se ramène à celle-ci, que dans une société nul ne peut agir socialement, ne peut se révéler d'une façon quelconque sans la collaboration d'un grand nombre d'autres individus, le plus souvent ignorés du premier. Les travailleurs obscurs qui, par l'accumulation de petits faits, préparent l'apparition d'une grande théorie scientifique formulée par un Newton, un Cuvier, un Darwin, composent en quelque sorte l'organisme dont ce génie est l'âme ; et leurs travaux sont les vibrations cérébrales dont cette théorie est la conscience. Conscience veut dire *gloire cérébrale*, en quelque sorte de l'élément le plus influent et le plus puissant du cerveau. Livrée à elle même donc, une monade ne peut rien. »
xiii « Voilà pourquoi enfin une œuvre sociale quelconque ayant un caractère à soi plus ou moins marqué, un produit industriel, un vers, une formule, une idée politique ou une autre apparue un jour quelque part dans le coin d'un cerveau, rêve comme Alexandre la conquête du monde, cherche à se projeter par milliers et millions d'exemplaires partout où il y a des hommes, et ne s'arrête dans ce chemin que refoulée par le choc de sa rivale non moins ambitieuse. »
xiv "et en outre il (Leibniz) a dû imaginer l'harmonie préétablie, de même que, comme complément de leurs atomes errants et aveugles, les matérialistes doivent invoquer les lois universelles ou la formule unique dans laquelle rentreraient toutes ces lois, sorte de commandement mystique auquel tous ces êtres obéiraient et qui n'émaneraient d'aucun être, sorte de verbe ineffable et inintelligible qui, dans avoir jamais été prononcé par personne, serait néammoins écouté partout et toujours. "
xv Exister c'est différer, la différence à vrai dire, est en un sens le côté substantiel des choses, ce qu'elles ont à la fois de plus propre et de plus commun. Il faut partir de là et se défendre d'expliquer cela, à quoi tout se ramène, y compris l'identité d'où l'on part faussement. Car l'identité n'est qu'un minimum et par suite qu'une espèce, et qu'une espèce infiniment rare, de différence, comme le repos n'est qu'un cas du mouvement, et le cercle qu'une variété de l'éllipse. Partir de l'identité

primordiale, c'est supposer à l'origine une singularité prodigieusement improbable, une coincidence impossible d'êtres multiples, à la fois distincts et semblables, ou bien l'inexplicable mystère d'un seul être simple et ultérieurement divisé on ne sait pourquoi. »

xvi « Toute la philosphe s'est fondée jusqu'ici sur le verbe *Etre*, dont la définition semblait la pierre philosophale à découvrir. On peut affirmer que, si elle eut été fondée sur le verbe *Avoir*, bien des débats stériles, bien des piétinements de l'esprit sur place auraient été évités. De ce principe Je suis, impossible de déduire, malgré toute la subtilité du monde, nulle autre existence que la mienne ; de là la négation de la réalité extérieure. Mais posez d'abord ce postulat : « *J'ai* » comme fait fondamental, l'*eu* et l'*ayant* sont donnés à la fois comme inséparables. »

xvii "Reconnaître qu'on ignore ce qu'est l'*être en soi de la pierre*, d'un végétal, et en même temps s'obstiner à dire qu'il est, c'est logiquement insoutenable; l'idée qu'on en a, il est facile de le montrer, a pour tout contenu nos états d'esprit, et comme, abstraction faite de nos états d'esprit, il ne reste rien, ou l'on n'affirme qu'eux en affirmant cet X substantiel et inconnaissable, ou l'on est forcé d'avouer qu'en affirmant autre chose on n'affirme rien. Mais si l'être en soi est semblable, au fond, à notre être, n'étant plus inconnaissable, il devient affirmable."