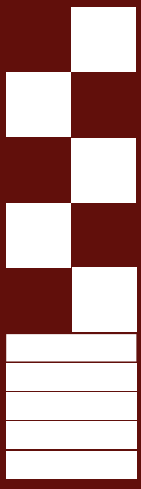
Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons



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CHAPTER TWO

The Laws of Imitation (1903)

Gabriel Tarde

Translated by Elsie Clews Parsons, New York: Henry Holt, pp. 74–87 [with elisions]. Originally published in French in 1890.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904), along with Le Bon, has been credited as one of the founders of social psychology (Martindale 1981, 282; Murphy and Newcomb 1937, 4). Born in southern France and schooled in Paris, he studied law with an emphasis on criminal behavior. He became a professor at College de France and, with a strong penchant for quantitative analysis, the head of the Bureau of Statistics at the French Ministry of Justice.

His major scholarly works included *Les Lois de L'imitation* (1890) and *L'Opinion et la Foule* [*Opinion and the Crowd*] (1901) and focused on the maintenance and transmission of social norms, laws, and customs. At the heart of his explanation for social cohesion was the act of imitation, or as it was often expressed, suggestion-imitation.

As with Le Bon's use of suggestion, numerous commentators have noted that Tarde's treatment of imitation was not novel (Martindale 1981; Karpf 1932). Its role as a force in social interaction had been noted as early as David Hume, examined by Walter Bagehot and applied by William James and Josiah Royce (see below), among others. But, as noted by Karpf, "Instead of giving

imitation *a* place in his thought . . . Tarde gave it *the* place" (1932, 95). It was, for him, "the elementary social phenomenon" (Ellwood 1901, 722) and the mechanism for the transmission of all social forms. Or, as Tarde himself declared, "The unvarying characteristic of every social fact whatsoever is that it is imitative" (1891, 41).

In *L'Opinion et la Foule* [*Opinion and the Crowd*], Tarde explored the role of suggestion-imitation in various collective settings. Presaging Herbert Blumer and others, he distinguished "crowds"—individuals in a local, specific congregation—from "publics"—individuals united not spatially but in sentiment or belief. Publics, moreover, were the creations of modern mass media, specifically the press (Martindale 1981, 284). For Tarde, public opinion, or the "public mind," was the product of the interaction of the press with the geographically disaggregated audience which, by virtue of the spatial and temporal distance, was more capable than the crowd of thoughtful political or social deliberation.

In the following excerpt from *The Laws of Imitation*, Tarde begins with a physiologically oriented consideration of memory and habit that constituted for him "self-imitation" and "suggestion." He expands his analysis to the social, invoking the contemporaneous language of hypnotism—the "magnetizer," the "magnetized," and the "somnambulist"—to explain the maintenance and evolution of social structure. Here again, the power of authority, or social prestige, is of central importance: "Since the somnambulist is for the time being deprived of this power of resistance, he can illustrate for us the imitative quiescence of the social being in so far as he is social." He notes, succinctly, "Society is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism."

Along with Le Bon, Tarde's ideas percolated through early social psychology and into the work of leading US social scientists such as Ross, Baldwin, Giddings, and Ellwood.

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The Laws of Imitation (1903)

IV

1. Taine sums up the thought of the most eminent physiologists when he happily remarks that the brain is a repeating organ for the senses and is itself made up of elements which repeat one another. In fact, the sight of such a congery of like cells and fibres makes any other idea impossible. Moreover, direct proof is at hand in the numerous observations and experiments which show that the cutting away of one hemisphere of the brain, and even the removal of much of the substance of the other, affects only the intensity, without at all changing the integrity, of the intellectual functions. The part that was removed, therefore, did not collaborate with the part that remained; both parts could only copy and reinforce each other. Their relation was not economic and utilitarian, but imitative and social in the sense that I use that term. Whatever may be the cellular function which calls forth thought (a highly complex vibration, perhaps?), there is no doubt that it is reproduced and multiplied in the interior of the brain every moment of our mental life and that to every distinct perception a distinct cellular function corresponds. The indefinite and inexhaustible continuation of these intricate and richly intersecting radiations constitutes memory and habit. When the multiplying repetition in question is confined to the nervous system, we have memory; when it spreads out into the muscular system, we have habit. Memory, so to speak, is a purely nervous habit; habit is both a nervous and a muscular memory.

Thus every act of perception, in as much as it involves an act of memory, which it always does, implies a kind of habit, an unconscious imitation of self by self. There is, evidently, nothing social in this. When the nervous

system is sufficiently excited to set in motion a certain set of muscles, habit, properly speaking, appears. It is another case of non-social, or, as I might better say, of presocial or subsocial self-imitation. This does not mean that, as alleged, an idea is an abortive act. Action is only the following up of an idea, the acquisition of a steadfast faith. Muscle works only for the enrichment of nerves and brain.

But if the remembered idea or image was originally lodged in the mind through conversation or reading, if the habitual act originated in the view or knowledge of a similar act on the part of others, these acts of memory and habit are social as well as psychological facts, and they show us the kind of imitation of which I have already spoken at such length. Here we have memory and habit which are not individual, but collective. Just as a man does not see, listen, walk, stand, write, play the flute, or, what is more, invent or imagine, except by means of many co-ordinated muscular memories, so a society could not exist or change or advance a single step unless it possessed an untold store of blind routine and slavish imitation which was constantly being added to by successive generations.

2. What is the essential nature of the suggestion which passes from one cerebral cell to another and which constitutes mental life? We do not know.[1] Do we know anything more about the essence of the suggestion which passes from one person to another and which constitutes social life? We do not; for if we take this phenomenon in itself, in its higher state of purity and intensity, we find it related to one of the most mysterious of facts, a fact which is being studied with intense curiosity by the baffled philosophic alienists of the day, i.e., somnambulism.[2] If you re-read contemporaneous works on this subject, especially those of Richet, Binet and Féré, Beaunis, Bernheim, Delboeuf, I shall not seem fanciful in thinking of the social man as a veritable somnambulist. I think, on the contrary, that I am conforming to the most rigorous scientific method in endeavouring to explain the complex by the simple, the compound by the element, and to throw light upon the mixed and complicated social tie, as we know it, by means of a social tie which is very pure, which is reduced to its simplest expression, and which is so happily realised for the edification of the sociologist in a state of somnambulism. Let

[1] At the time when the foregoing and the following considerations first appeared in print, in November, 1884, in the *Revue philosophique*, hypnotic suggestion was but barely spoken of and the idea of universal social suggestion, an idea which has since been so strongly emphasised by Bernheim and others, was cast up against me as an untenable paradox. Nothing could be commoner than this view at present.

[2] This old-fashioned term shows that at the time of the first publication of this passage the word hypnotism had not as yet been altogether substituted for somnambulism.

us take the hypothetical case of a man who has been removed from every extra-social influence, from the direct view of natural objects, and from the instinctive obsessions of his different senses, and who has communication only with those like himself or, more especially, to simplify the question, with one person like himself. Is not such an ideal subject the proper one through which to study by experiment and observation the really essential characteristics of social relations, set free in this way from all complicating influences of a natural or physical order? But are not hypnotism and somnambulism the exact realisation of this hypothesis? Then I shall not excite surprise if I briefly review the principal phenomena of these singular states and if I find both magnified and diminutised, both overt and covert, forms of them in social phenomena. Through such a comparison, we may perhaps come to a better understanding of the fact that is called abnormal by showing to what extent it is general, and of the fact that is general by perceiving its distinctive traits in high relief in the apparent anomaly.

The social like the hypnotic state is only a form of dream, a dream of command and a dream of action. Both the somnambulist and the social man are possessed by the illusion that their ideas, all of which have been suggested to them, are spontaneous. To appreciate the truth of this sociological point of view, we must not take ourselves into consideration, for should we admit this truth about ourselves, we would then be escaping from the blindness which it affirms; and in this way a counter argument might be made out. Let us call to mind some ancient people whose civilisation differs widely from our own, the Egyptians, or Spartans, or Hebrews. Did not that people think, like us, that they were autonomous, although, in reality, they were but the unconscious puppets whose strings were pulled by their ancestors or political leaders or prophets, when they were not being pulled by their own contemporaries? What distinguishes us modern Europeans from these alien and primitive societies is the fact that the magnetisation has become mutual, so to speak, at least to a certain extent; and because we, in our democratic pride, a little exaggerate this reciprocity, because, moreover, forgetting that in becoming mutual, this magnetisation, the source of all faith and obedience, has become general, we err in flattering ourselves that we have become less credulous and docile, less imitative, in short, than our ancestors. This is a fallacy, and we shall have to rid ourselves of it. But even if the aforesaid notion were true, it would nevertheless be clear that before the relations of model and copyist, of master and subject, of apostle and neophyte, had become reciprocal or alternative, as we ordinarily see them in our democratic society, they must

of necessity have begun by being one-sided and irreversible. Hence castes. Even in the most democratic societies, the one-sidedness and irreversibility in question always exist at the basis of social imitations, i.e., in the family. For the father is and always will be his son's first master, priest, and model. Every society, even at present, begins in this way.

Therefore, in the beginning of every old society, there must have been, *a fortiori*, a great display of authority exercised by certain supremely imperious and positive individuals. Did they rule through terror and imposture, as alleged? This explanation is obviously inadequate. They ruled through their *prestige*. The example of the magnetiser alone can make us realise the profound meaning of this word. The magnetiser does not need to lie or terrorise to secure the blind belief and the passive obedience of his magnetised subject. He has prestige—that tells the story. That means, I think, that there is in the magnetised subject a certain potential force of belief and desire which is anchored in all kinds of sleeping but unforgotten memories, and that this force seeks expression just as the water of a lake seeks an outlet. The magnetiser alone is able through a chain of singular circumstances to open the necessary outlet to this force. All forms of prestige are alike; they differ only in degree. We have prestige in the eyes of anyone in so far as we answer his need of affirming or of willing some given thing. Nor is it necessary for the magnetiser to speak in order to be believed and obeyed. He need only act; an almost imperceptible gesture is sufficient.

This movement, together with the thought and feeling which it expresses, is immediately reproduced. Maudsley says that he is not sure that the somnambulist is not enabled to read unconsciously what is in the mind through "an *unconscious* imitation of the attitude and expression of the person whose *exact* muscular contradictions are *instinctively copied*."[3] Let us observe that the magnetised subjects imitates the magnetiser, but that the latter does not imitate the former. *Mutual imitation*, mutual prestige or *sympathy*, in the meaning of Adam Smith, is produced only in our so-called waking life and among people who seem to exercise no magnetic influence over one another. If, then, I have put prestige, and not sympathy, at the foundation and origin of society, it is because, as I have said before, the unilateral must have preceded the reciprocal.[4] Without an age of authority, however sur-

[3] *The Pathology of Mind* [p. 69. Henry Maudsley, M. D., New York, 1890. The italics are the author's.-Tr.].

[4] On this point I need correction. Sympathy is certainly the primary source of sociability and the hidden or overt soul of every kind of imitation, even of imitation which is envious and calculating, even of imitation of an enemy. Only, it is certain that sympathy itself

prising this fact may be, an age of comparative fraternity would never have existed. But, to return, why should we really marvel at the one-sided, passive imitation of the somnambulist? Any act of any one of our fellows inspires us who are lookers-on with the more or less irrational idea of imitation. If we at times resist this tendency, it is because it is neutralised by some antagonistic suggestions of memory or perception. Since the somnambulist is for the time being deprived of this power of resistance, he can illustrate for us the imitative quiescence of the social being in so far as he is social, i.e., in so far as he has relations exclusively with his fellows and, especially, with one of his fellows.

If the social man were not at the same time a natural being, open and sensitive to the impressions of external nature and of alien societies, he would never be capable of change. Like associates would remain forever incapable of changing spontaneously the type of traditional ideas and desires which had been impressed upon them by the conventional teaching of their parents, priests, or leaders. Certain peoples have been known to approach singularly close to this condition. Nascent communities, like young children, are, in general, indifferent and insensible to all which does not concern man or the kind of man whom they resemble, the man of their own race or tribe. "The somnambulist sees and hears," says A. Maury, "only what enters into the preoccupations of his dream." In other words, all his power of belief and desire is concentrated on a single point. Is not this the exact effect of obedience and imitation through fascination? Is not fascination a genuine neurosis, a kind of unconscious polarisation of love and faith? […]

But I must not dwell any longer upon the above comparison. At any rate, I hope that I have at least made my reader feel that to thoroughly understand the essential social fact, as I perceive it, knowledge of the infinitely subtle facts of mind is necessary, and that the roots of even what seems to be the simplest and most superficial kind of sociology strike far down into the depths of the most inward and hidden parts of psychology and physiology. Society is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism. This is the epitome of this chapter. As for the second part of the proposition, I beg the reader's indulgence for any exaggeration I may have been guilty of. I must also remove a possible objection. It may be urged that submission to some ascendency does not always mean following the example of the person whom we trust and obey. But does not belief in anyone always mean belief in that which he believes or seems to believe? Does not obedience to someone mean

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begins by being one-sided instead of mutual.

that we will that which he wills or seems to will? Inventions are not made to order, nor are discoveries undertaken as a result of persuasive suggestion. Consequently, to be credulous and docile, and to be so as pre-eminently as the somnambulist and the social man, is to be, primarily, imitative. To innovate, to discover, to awake for an instant from his dream of home and country, the individual must escape, for the time being, from his social surroundings. Such unusual audacity makes him super-social rather than social.