The New Tarde

Sociology after the End of the Social

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IN AN interesting article just recently and elegantly translated from the French by Brian Singer, the Canadian social theorist Michel Freitag calls attention to the postmodern phenomenon of 'the progressive loss of the transcendental dimension represented by the normative reference to Justice' (2002: 176). What better phrase could sum up the ill-fated history of the strong sociological conception of the social? What is exposed is the difficulty in thinking of any universal premises, in the absence of these, that could possibly be laid out for sociology to work from today. For some time we have been moving into a period of uncertainty surrounding the epistemological issues underlying key themes such as justice. But we have also been witnessing a new instability in the illusion of the transcendental, social dimension itself which sociology has so often relied upon as its source of disciplinary necessity. The question has been raised as to whether it is desirable, or even possible, to continue to think in sociological terms at a time when we are seeing the end of the social.

Some thinkers have begun to advance a claim that this moment of disintegration paradoxically ushers in a more radical and direct *metaphysical-theological* social opening than was made possible by Comte and Durkheim (Wernick, 2000). It is admittedly still difficult to see, on this plural ground, exactly what modes of investigation and intervention could be appropriate in such conditions. However, at the same time, there has been an acceleration in the degree to which world events are able to clarify our sense of urgency for a mode of critical social examination that addresses universal human hopes, fears and the relations that govern them. Freitag had already asserted, in the 1980s, that the new 'founding myth of our depoliticized postmodernity' will soon be represented, if it is not already, as a 'struggle against terrorism' (2002: 188). Indeed, as was pointed out by theorists as far back as the 1950s and 1960s, our very human existence has

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been at least since the atomic age linked with our global means of security (see e.g. Marcuse, 1986). So if our means of security has been largely dependent upon a premise of good-will and common sense, and if the social subject of this latter, as well as its other, can so easily be annihilated in the same act, and an indefinite technological fantasy of controlled war replace the respect of distance, surely this is finally indisputable proof that – even at the level of sheer faith – our existence as peoples and as individuals is indeed in question and must be reproblematized.

New questions have begun to multiply. Can we return to the originally pre-modern representational model of good-will and common sense that even thinkers such as Freitag have pointed to with a certain resigned nostalgia? Or is the way forward to embrace a kind of futuristic immanent socio-theology? Are alienated pre-histories and future utopias the only roots of sociality we can take comfort from?

At the end of the 19th century, Gabriel Tarde was the insider *par excellence* in circles critical of the idea of a transcendental social fact. Even at the inception of the idea of the transcendental social fact Tarde soon became disenchanted with the latter, calling instead for an advance within a certain realist spirit towards an exploration of newer kinds of affirmation of life together. The thought of Tarde and the genuine reasons why we should go back to study his *oeuvre* indeed illustrate much of what is at stake for the future of social theory in a complex and fraught geo-political world. Thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Éric Alliez, inspired by Gilles Deleuze's dense and all-too-brief comments on Tarde, have very recently developed those insights and confirmed, for a contemporary reader, the significance of Tarde's thought as a harbinger of postmodern theory.[1] In the present article I shall argue that the new reception of Tarde, still in its early stages, has indeed begun to shed new and useful light on French theory. More broadly, I think, we shall also see that Tarde's thought provides us with some clues as to how to think and act within the ambit of a sociological imagination, even when the unity of the social is radically called into question. For many recent thinkers, to pursue sociology after the end of the social is to defend the need for a normative discourse which to them seems possible only if one holds the line on the transcendental nature of the object. However, it is unclear whether such a tactic could end in something more than disciplinary isolation. For the Tardians, as we shall see, to pursue sociology as a normative discourse in postmodern circumstances is worthwhile, but only when one views the difficulties of the new circumstances with a seriousness that calls for a new beginning and a re-examination of motivations, starting at the bottom with a critical re-examination of realist social ontology.

The Problem of Resemblance

For Bruno Latour, Tarde has very recently become of interest. Burdened with the problem of communicating his Actor Network Theory (ANT) to an increasingly wide audience, Latour has recently expressed something like relief to now be able to point to 'the good news that ANT actually has a

forefather, namely Gabriel Tarde' (2002: 117). One of the central rallying concepts of ANT, but also the one that is particularly hard for many to grasp, is the doctrine of radical symmetry among all items in the field of social action, including persons and objects. The problem that has inspired Latour is that of how to conceive of a universal sociology that is based upon particular cases of interaction, not just between human subjects symbolically, but rather – radically – between all items of relevance in social affairs. Of course, such a problematic raises fundamental questions for many readers. How does one conceive of the basis for such interrelations? Is not Latour by-passing the problem of human perception and the whole difficulty of phenomenological distantiation that occupied so many thinkers of the 20th century? How can one speak of any basis of resemblance between humans and non-humans without such grand philosophical theories? How, without going back to medieval scholasticism and some sort of theory of innate qualities in each element of the universe granted by an all-powerful God, could an ant (read: ANT) be a participant in *ontology*?

Latour's interest in Tarde lies in the posing of the *problem of resemblance* as a philosophical contextualization of Actor Network Theory. Let us examine, then, some of the details of Tarde's highly intriguing approach to this question. Tarde's major text is his *The Laws of Imitation* (1903), originally published in French in 1890. He also wrote a major tome in the same period entitled *Penal Philosophy* (1912), and a number of important essays preceding those volumes, including *Monadologie et Sociologie* (1999). Tarde was a *juge d'instruction* in his native town of Sarlat, Dordogne in the latter half of the 19th century and then became the head of the Bureau of Statistics of the Ministry of Justice in Paris. Both of his major books were written and published during the latter appointment. Only after many years as a leading official in the French bureaucracy was Tarde to be appointed Professor of Modern Philosophy in the turn-of-the-century Collège de France. In his introduction to the first English edition of *The Laws of Imitation*, F.H. Giddings praises Tarde's transcendence of his role as a functionary to become a renowned social philosopher. Giddings describes Tarde as 'a man whom the state could not overlook' (1903: vi).

In *The Laws of Imitation* Tarde takes up Durkheim's early doctrines regarding the origins and operations of social resemblances. Durkheim's theory of the *conscience collective* and the later theory of the symbolic continue throughout Durkheim's *oeuvre* to presuppose these doctrines. In them, Durkheim asserted that 'primitive' or 'mechanical' societies, those in which social psychology originates, have this status because they are bound by the resemblances between their members (1984). Tarde's attack does not initially dispute this but rather asks why it is that resemblances such as duplications may come about *also between* these so-called 'segments' (Durkheim, 1984: 200–10; Tarde, 1903: 40). Tarde raises the question of apparently fortuitous resemblances between whole, widely dispersed communities. Durkheim had simply assumed that duplication resemblances occur and that the latter are primarily significant for certain *members* of the

segments (1984: 212). Tarde asks on what basis a fortuitous resemblance between 'small segments within larger segments' is assumed and then quickly ignored in favor of the supposedly essential resemblances that bind together the whole group. Tarde thus adduces the social theoretical role of descriptive homology and exposes how it is diminished in favor of what he argues is a no less dogmatic reliance upon functional analogy (1903: 40).

More generally, however, Tarde is suggesting that to take such a line of criticism is to criticize the very premise of the group as a starting point for sociological analysis. Tarde's aim is veritably to strike right at the heart of the mainstream sociological project (1969: 136–40). What Tarde's problem is meant to indicate is that resemblance is a phenomenon with a much wider provenance in the social world than merely in so-called traditional or mechanical societies, and that therefore any segmental theory could not possibly satisfactorily account for social resemblances as a whole. As Latour puts it:

> The logical impossibility that has been so vehemently criticized in ANT scholars – how can you impute will and belief to scallops, microbes, door closers, rocks, cars and instruments when it is always you the human 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 you must also *stop saying what they are*. . . . 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. (2002: 130)

In terms of classical social theory, such a view holds that if Durkheim has not fully accounted for social resemblances then Durkheim has no right to move to a definition of society as based in primitive cultures which then become modernized through functional differentiation. There would be a whole range of phenomena of social resemblances ready for anyone to point to with the power to upset this narrative of the emergence of a monolithic modernity.

The Sources of Variation

Others have also found this problem intriguing. Rather than attack Durkheim's reification of social facts in the usual way on grounds of ahistorical sociologistic optimism and epistemological imperialism, the Tardian way is to call into question the rigidity of Durkheim's metaphor of solidity which underlies his concept of the reality of association, namely, the concept of 'solidarity' (see Durkheim, 1984: 126). In an age when fragmentation continues very conspicuously to seem more normal than pathological, there has been a move by Éric Alliez to republish Tarde's works in French with a view to re-thinking the social assumptions inherent in philosophy. For Alliez, what is of interest in Tarde is the potential for a sociological contextualization of a philosophical theory of *variation*. Alliez is passionate that,

in particular, one ought to 'tackle this polymorphous thought [of Tarde's] through a reading of' *Monadologie et Sociologie* (1999: 1). And it is no coincidence that the latter essay has been the first in the order of Tarde's re-releases, for we shall see that, for the philosopher, certain key Leibnizian assumptions in Tarde will be taken as paramount.

If the problem of resemblance is to be generalized over the whole open-ended horizon of the social, as we saw in the previous section, then the question arises as to the provenance of variation. This is then the point of departure for some of Tarde's more controversial claims. He must locate a source of variation in order to locate the possibility of a critical purchase upon the field of the social. Tarde's move is bold: according to him, 'resemblances between communities which are separated by more or less insurmountable obstacles', that is, Durkheimian segments, can and should be explained 'through the common possession of some entirely forgotten primitive model' (1903: 46). On the strength of this idea, Tarde goes on to elaborate in *The Laws of Imitation*, in direct counter-position to Durkheimian sociology, a theory of social formation through model formation. Modernity will no longer be viewed as a monumental, general, floating symbol of the moment of change within societies, no longer be viewed vis-a-vis a perception of the danger of fracture and fragmentation, but will now be taken as an open-ended series of small but specific and irreversible changes that bring about the evolution and multiplication of societies. Instead of many fragments orbiting one great crumbling leviathan, modernity is rather made up of many small continuous series of social constitutions without a central subject. Modernity is constituted, as Latour puts it, as the 'end of the social' taken as a central category (2002). *Being* modern can never be established as a solid, central social fact because being modern is by definition to embrace variation, a kind of freedom, as a life process (cf. Latour, 1993).

But what is the *source* of this variation? Tarde provides a direct response to this question with a characteristic flourish. As he puts it, the social:

> . . . regularity to which I refer is not in the least apparent in social things until they are resolved into their several elements, when it is found to lie in the simplest of them, in combinations of distinct inventions, in flashes of genius which have been accumulated and changed into commonplace lights. (1903: 3)

A major aspect of Tarde's theory, then, as placed in contrast to that of Durkheim, is that it entails a certain optimism with respect to the power of thinking and of ideation as forces of social change. At times Tarde is capable of putting this point very bluntly:

> . . . let us explain these changes through the more or less fortuitous appearance, as to time and place, of certain great ideas, or rather, of a considerable number of both major and minor ideas, of ideas which are generally anonymous and usually of obscure birth; which are simple or abstruse; which are

> seldom illustrious, but which are always novel. Because of this latter attribute, I shall take the liberty of baptising them collectively *inventions*. (1903: 2)

It should be noted that these Tardian inventions, these novel ideas, these personal moments of creativity with direct social ramifications, are not purposive actions. Thus, perhaps contrary to common sense, for Tarde imitation is not meant as a type of action based upon will or volition. Rather, imitations, the media of inventions, are the social as such. What we have here is, in large part, a social metaphysics. As Alliez puts it:

> . . . in order to follow [Tarde's] 'Monadology and Sociology's metaphysical line of force, we would like to be able to demonstrate the profound inadequacy of the traditional terms held over from individualism and sociologism to account for the différend between, and the respective positions of, Tarde and Durkheim: doesn't Tarde claim to found a 'universal sociology'? (1999: 6)

It should be pointed out, however, that, for Tarde, the existence of innovative variation, veritably a matter of metaphysical linkage with every movement in the universe, is nevertheless also inextricably linked with the project of difference embraced by the social particular. In Tarde's view, the social particular is located in the form of a personal self who partakes in the universe through a highly personal creativity. However, this creativity of the self has agency for Tarde, not as a function of an interiorization of a self which imagines itself spatially and then creates its world negatively in relation to that of others. Rather, creativity comes about as the self becomes a model for others. I would describe Tarde's view of this process as *invention through following*. The process is one of an anarchic or spontaneous mutual influence among actors. An actor does not 'participate' in this as we normally think of participation by means of an ego and a bodily extension. Rather, the self is defined only as a medium of a creativity which is relative only to the *sociality* that the self comes from and that it can transform. As Alliez puts it:

> . . . if this cascade of successive mesmerizations is imagined to bring about, due to the creation of new *media*, the possibility of mutual mesmerizations, 'the strange ideal' of a democratic equality whose *public* is formed as if by 'the propagation of a wave in a perfectly elastic milieu' will be attained. (1999: 17)

Thus, the outcome of creative variation tends to become a kind of modern, inclusive sociality. The source of variation is not 'primitive' but is rather simply a different sociality.

If this sounds fantastic and tautological, nonetheless many of its implications are clear. Essentially, one could say that Tarde is profoundly against the notion of intellectual property, and profoundly for an archeological theory of interiority in which the social particular is concentrated and

determined in the having and thinking of a particular *social* person. For Tarde, becoming-social and acting are one and the same process of variation. But Tarde nonetheless implies that a difference is made which distinguishes a source-side and a public-side of variation. What is the nature of this difference? The Tardian way is to argue that it is one of resistance. The resistance of the social particular is that which animates each micrological model formation. However, for Tarde, this resistance acquires consistency and measurable variability via the example of the family model (1903: 287). With this, Tarde prevents his idea of becoming social from being understood simply as the coming about of an anarchy of isolated fashionable individuals who celebrate their own self-centered achievements. Instead he implicates individuation in the progression and expansion of a cultural model of the family straight down to its natural origins (1903: 287). Indeed, for Tarde, it implicates the individual in a 'vacillating struggle between custom and fashion which lasts until the ultimate triumph of the former' (1903: 343). Becoming social thus begins as individuation, but rather than coming to rest and perhaps to stagnation in an ego, it quickly moves on to become, ultimately, a larger cultural force.

It should be highlighted here that Tarde assumes that the family is the original starting point of sociality. Despite his pan-sociologism, one could say, Tarde nevertheless assumes that a kind of privileged source of sociality lies in the family-type. Indeed this assumption will create a certain underlying tension with Tarde's more explicit emphasis upon desire. To put it succinctly, Tarde understands desire as desire for modernity in the sense of a breaking out of a tradition. Desire is an act initiated by an attraction to a distant figure and is significant mainly insofar as this act is characterizable as model formation. As a consequence of positing that the family is the source of *all* sociality, Tarde thus must locate resistance in the tension between a constraining family and a family member who desires to break out. He resolves this tension, rather weakly, by asserting that whatever social progress comes about the family is always reinstated, *if not physically, then as a special, central example for customary interactions*. In contrast, Durkheim had thought that there is no need to privilege such a form of mediation as this family type, since according to Durkheim one needs only to affirm the ontological priority and necessity of social coherence per se, and mediations can then be construed in a variety of ways under the general heading of institutionalization. In Tarde, the family type comes to pervade the social, perhaps in an unrealistic way.

Tarde's weapon against this Durkheimian line of response is to go back to the problem of resemblance. As Tarde acknowledges in *Monadologie et Sociologie*, this point of critique is, in fact, a rephrasing of Leibniz's problem of continuity, or what the empiricists called the problem of uniformity. This problem is the battleground for all debates over the notion of coherence and, as such, it actually pre-dates sociology by many generations. What is at issue is one of the major points of contention between rationalists and empiricists. As the 18th century progressed, empiricists such as Hume

began to investigate the phenomena of coherence for a uniformity which should be the condition of truth and knowledge and arrived at the influential conclusion that we can only be profoundly skeptical about whether or not we can ever truly and objectively know what uniformity in itself, this condition, is. In the immediately previous, 'baroque' generation, Leibniz had held precisely the opposite opinion: that we can, in fact, know exactly what constitutes coherence and uniformity. The condition for this knowledge, according to Leibniz, is to seek for the conditions of uniformity in the constitution of continuity. Leibniz relies here on a kind of implicit contrast between the ideas of coherence and continuity. In this view, whereas the notion of coherence seems to imply a deep, mysterious uniformity of a general surface of continuity that one can only affirm on faith, if investigated carefully continuity can be seen as in itself actually only the surface of a deeper uniformity of particulars. The investigation of continuity, then, ought to provide a means to penetrate deeper behind the premise of coherence.

As we know, however, this Leibnizian by-passing of the problems of faith, totality and transcendence by means of his doctrine of continuity becomes increasingly overshadowed by the Enlightenment concern with the problem of how to believe in a consistent, error-free subjectivity through time. By following Tarde would we not then be ignoring the benefits of the way the Enlightenment transformed this fundamental problem of the human condition? This is an important question that cannot be answered here, but one can at least point out that in the 20th century we have indubitably seen an erosion of faith in the Enlightenment approach and a veritable 'return of the repressed' in the reaffirmation of the imprecision and necessary prejudice inherent in the hermeneutical situation of the human being. Indeed, these Enlightenment and hermeneutical adversaries have, just by following their approaches in relative mutual isolation, created an ethical impasse in the pitting of precision-guided instrumental mastery against the project of imperfect human political autonomy. This has led to what for some today is a revelation: that not only are these approaches mutually incommensurable but they are, perhaps, *both* exhausted paradigms. Perhaps we really do need to re-plumb the basis of the human condition. Even if we do not agree with this, at least we can get some idea of why new sources for social theory are being sought in a pre-Enlightenment mode of discourse.

Tarde's appropriation of Leibniz's problem of continuity is present in the challenge he poses to Durkheim's sociology in the form of the problem of fortuitous social resemblances. Tarde challenges the uniformity that Durkheim presupposes. As we have seen, Durkheim had assumed that some sort of duplication of functions occurs among so-called segmental societies defined as societies which cohere via the resemblance of their members, and Tarde points out that there is nothing to distinguish a 'duplication of a function', in this context, from any kind of 'resemblance', and that therefore Durkheim has explained nothing about why and how segmental societies, and therefore any societies, should be the focus of a key ontological

attribution. Taking societies as more or less arbitrary segments is the basis of the statistical method. However, according to Tarde, before we can speak of resemblance and duplication and statistics we must examine the idea of continuity. What Tarde will do is search for a concept of continuity that can be adapted to the modern context of sociological discourse. Tarde finds what he is looking for in the concept of *repetition*. He will, then, state this strongly: 'every advance in knowledge tends to strengthen the conviction that *all resemblance is due to repetition*' (1903: 14). Tarde thus comes to the view that the notion of repetition grounds our understanding of resemblance and duplication, and therefore it grounds our basic understanding of statistics. What is real in resemblance and duplication is the repetition that they bring about. Statistics are not based upon the fact that certain population segments of society are naturally isolated from others as a matter of an indifferent, thing-like 'fact', but are rather based upon the choice to examine real repetitions that are finite and irreversible in the sense that they appeal to us on the basis of questions that we cannot avoid.

Tarde's espousal of the concept of repetition, if correct, would seem to have an immediate critical impact upon Durkheimian sociology, especially as regards the latter's strategic focus upon consolidated social facts that purportedly persist in conforming to certain types over time. In contrast to the concept of persistence which refers to types, the concept of repetition – as the theory goes – refers always to the repetition of actual particulars. Here seems to be a way of conceiving continuity without referring to types. Rather, in Tarde's words, 'the relation of universal to particular . . . is precisely that of repetition to variation' (1903: 7). And furthermore, 'repetition exists . . . for the sake of variation', and not vice versa (1903: 7). Herein lies the main source of agreement between Tarde and Leibniz. For Leibniz, precisely because coherence is based in continuity, and continuity is only attributable to particulars, it cannot be attributed to any uniform, general categories. Similarly, for Tarde, because resemblance is based in repetition, and repetition is only attributable to particulars, a structural principle of resemblance cannot be attributed to what he takes to be a general 'mechanical' type of society over other 'organic' types.

At first glance this might seem like a devastating critique of the Durkheimian approach to the constitution of the social. However, here a complication exists that tends to obscure the real meaning of this apparently devastating point of critique. For in Durkheim generality has a specific limited place and is not for him sufficient to define a social category. Generality, in Durkheimian sociology, is not what accounts for the fixity or stability of social facts, since the latter are only contingent constraints in relation to what is ultimately, in Durkheim's view, an inexorable and gradual creative evolution of societies. I think this would account for why Tarde's point has not been as devastating against Durkheim as it might seem it ought to be: the fact that there is effectively a strong concept of continuity in Durkheim's thought that Tarde seems to have missed.

Nevertheless, Tarde's point can be understood productively today as

an interesting theory for *why* generality cannot be a basis for sociology, one which differs from the way Durkheim simply takes this for granted in Durkheim's own evolutionist assumptions. According to Tarde:

> . . . as soon as a new science has staked out its field of characteristic resemblances and repetitions, it must compare them and note the bond of solidarity which unites their concomitant variations. But, as a matter of fact, the mind does not fully understand nor clearly recognise the relation of cause and effect, except in as much as the effect resembles or repeats the cause, as for example, when a sound wave produces another sound wave, or a cell, another cell. (1903: 6)

For while Durkheim does not attribute an absolute fixity to the facts that support the theory of social types, he nevertheless does explicitly attribute to them a *relative* solidity, a contingent or evolvable mode of constraint (1984: 126). In Tarde's view, this conception of social constraint is not an error in the sense that something like it does not occur. Rather, it involves a distortion because it is based upon a refusal to examine how social transcendence can be better related to the concept of repetition rather than communicated crudely and blindly via a metaphor of relative physical solidity. For Tarde, instead of firm, 'solid' types of societies we actually think of reproductions of societies which exhibit similar compositions. Societies are not made up of an invisible, evolving, quasi-physical substance, a substance that is *indifferent*, but in the words of Tarde, 'at all times and places the apparent continuity of history may be decomposed into distinct and separable events, events both small and great, which consist of *questions followed by solutions*' (1903: 156). The problem of continuity brings to light, for Tarde, a *compositional perspective*, a perspective upon 'things' as certain repeated gatherings of elements, as particular events whose unity is no greater than that of complex, problematic compositions.

In this compositional perspective, 'similarities' are seen not simply as constructions, or as purely subjectively necessary as opposed to absolutely or objectively necessary. It is important to note that, like Leibniz, Tarde feels no need to draw any skeptical conclusion from the compositional perspective such as that we cannot know with certainty whether or not societies exist at all or that 'societies' are only the degree of any given aggregation of individuals. Rather, the full, overall necessity of the existence of the particular via repetition and/or continuity is upheld by both Tarde and Leibniz. As Tarde puts it, 'repetitions and resemblances . . . are the *necessary themes* of the differences and variations which exist in all phenomena' (1903: 6). And it follows from this, in Tarde's view, that neither is 'the crude incoherence of historic facts . . . proof at all against the fundamental regularity of social life or the possibility of a social science' (1903: 12).

Immanence

In fact, many of these concerns of Latour, Alliez and Tarde have been expressed at various times by Deleuze. And this is quite appropriate, since

it is a little known fact that, in *Difference and Repetition* (1994), Deleuze suggests that the whole outline of that book, the bridge between his philosophical studies and his concern with the social theorization of the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984, 1988) was in fact inspired by what he found in Tarde's work, particularly in *Monadologie et Sociologie* (1999). According to Deleuze, this essay presents 'the free figure of difference' (1994: 314). If the *Laws of Imitation* had focused upon 'universal repetition' as the ground of scientific inquiry that enables the pursuit of sociology and binds it into a working relationship with philosophy, in his short essays Tarde had been better able to highlight more effectively the ultimate end of repetition as difference. In Deleuze's words, it is specifically Tardian philosophy, 'one of the last great philosophies of nature, in the tradition of Leibniz', in which we can find the discovery that 'repetition . . . is not the process by which difference is augmented or diminished, but the process by which it "goes on differing" and "takes itself as its end" ' (1994: 313). Similarly, in *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze states explicitly that his own interest lies primarily in a:

> . . . difference that would not extend, or 'would not have to extend' as far as opposition and contradiction; [and] a concept of repetition in which physical, mechanical, or bare repetitions . . . would find their *raison d'être* in the more profound structures of a hidden repetition in which a 'differential' is disguised and displaced. (1994: xx)

What matters to Deleuze is this idea that he discovers in Tarde: that 'the perpetual divergence and decentring of difference [corresponds] closely to a displacement and a disguising within repetition' (1994: xx). The thesis of *Difference and Repetition*, then, Deleuze's self-professed first attempt at an original philosophy, comes from Deleuze's reading of Tarde, a self-professed master of 'pure sociology' (Tarde, 1903: x).

Because Deleuze implicitly affirms that Tardian thought constitutes an option for sociology which rejects skepticism against social ontology but is nevertheless critical of the latter for 'assuming what must be explained' (1994: 314), Durkheimian ontology is tacitly accepted by Deleuze as a point of departure for thinking the social. The sources of Deleuzian philosophy in Tarde and Durkheim are very little – if at all – appreciated in contemporary Deleuze studies. According to Deleuze, there can be a 'microsociology' that need not be a study of relations and encounters between exemplary individuals: 'for the alternative – impersonal givens or the Ideas of great men – [Tarde] substitutes the little ideas of little men, the little inventions and interferences between imitative currents' (1994: 314). Now, to be sure, it might seem tempting for some to interpret this statement as a description of an alternative, perhaps a 'radical' kind of interactionist sociology. The rhetoric of 'little ideas of little men' seems to resonate with the project of interactionist microsociology with its concern to get back to the problems of everyday life. But there is, in fact, absolutely no basis for such an

interpretation. For Deleuze, Tarde is 'not necessarily concerned with what happens between individuals' (1994: 314). Generally interactionists study that which takes place 'between individuals' as it appears in communication, or more generally in the language of the symbolic. According to Deleuze, where Tarde's main interest lies is not with communication or with the symbolic, but rather with 'what happens within a single individual, for example, hesitation understood as "infinitesimal social opposition", or invention as "infinitesimal social adaptation" ' (1994: 314). Deleuze is very clear that he is not interested in any consideration which might be construed as a given in the mind of an individual or as existing external to the process of becoming social. And here a Deleuzian could indeed point to one of the major premises of Tardian sociology, formulated as 'the tendency of imitation to free itself from reproduction' (Tarde, 1903: 250). This means that imitation can be at a great historical distance and that it is therefore not contingent upon intimate, or ultimately physical, social contact.

However, Tarde reserves a place for the personal self as the key agency of social change. Moreover, as we have seen, Tarde will begin from the premise that the resemblances which seem to make apparently static traditional societies cohere are all rather, in effect, resemblances of transient customs (1903: 253–4). According to Tarde, social quantity plays a key role in the transmission and transformation of customs and is related to it expressly through the 'nervous excitability' that creates conditions favorable to social change (1903: 247–8). What he is indeed referring to is a purely affect-based collective phenomenon. In Tarde's view, imitation operates completely on a non-extended plane, with what Tarde called 'ideas', on a kind of socio-psychic current of contagion. However, this can in no way be taken to diminish the fact that, for Tarde, the centrality of the example of the family extends everywhere and no less into the development of urban life, where transformations of custom might seem more related to mass behaviors (Tarde, 1903: 247–8). Thus custom, for Tarde, is not understood in the ordinary sense of simply any kind of territorialization. In Tarde's view, custom is organized specifically and exclusively through *familial* territorialization.

Two points here are relevant to the social thought of Deleuze. First, despite his salutary critical point of view, nevertheless with the theory of contagious currents Tarde fails to provide a non-metaphorical account of social continuity. Second, the current of contagion, though it is from a Deleuzian perspective tantalizingly close to providing a new model of philosophy that would be grounded in social desire, is unfortunately always referred back for a sense of coherence to the model of the family. For this reason the figure of difference that Tarde elaborates by means of the metaphor of currents is not as radical, not as free, not as Bergsonian as someone interested in radical process such as Deleuze would wish for. So, for these two reasons, in his first collaboratory work with Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (1984), Deleuze will begin to implicitly but clearly diminish the optimistic attitude towards Tarde that he had in *Difference and*

Repetition. Deleuze will turn against the reliance of 'pure sociology' upon metaphor, but he will become perhaps even more repulsed by the idea of the recurrence of the model of the family in the realm of culture. For Deleuze the key to Tarde's social philosophy is not its model of the family but rather its articulation of the *immanence* of the social as an ontological window which traverses a plane that creates a fundamental continuity between our minds and that which comes to us from outside in the unfolding events around and through us.

Conclusion

In this article I have critically examined 'the new Tarde' and have implicitly attempted to evaluate this discourse's potential to be integrated into mainstream philosophy and social theory. At the very least, the new discourse on Tarde sheds a profound light on a number of issues to do with postmodernity and French theory. First and foremost, I believe, there is the question of rivalry, the question of who is postmodern French theory's real rival? Is its rival simply the model of individualism in a context of common sense as underwrites the idea of the Enlightenment, or is its basic rival rather a more peculiar and advanced movement of social theory? What we have seen here is that before deconstruction, before reflexive social theory, before the feeling of weightlessness and disenchantment accompanying their accomplishment, it was Tarde who was the principal *bête noire* to the most epistemologically ambitious French theory there has ever been, and this latter movement is essentially Durkheimianism.

The new discourse on Tarde involves an exploration of social ontology that presents itself as alternative to basic Durkheimian premises, in particular as an alternative to the idea of the existence of a social species which is supposed to transcend the contingency of social and political history and provide a foundation for the social sciences. However, what the proponents of Tarde present that is new, I would suggest, is an attack not upon any form of determinism or the possibility of a social science but rather upon certain key Durkheimian presuppositions that undergird Durkheim's peculiarly strong affirmation of the social. What links these *problématiques* is that in Tarde there is purported to be a discovery of a way to express the social in its own, infinitely variable terms and a refusal to accept terms external to this site of translation. There is a certain 'postmodernity' in this idea of an interpretive multiplicity. However, the novelty here is that this 'site of translation' is much more understood in a numerical-intensive sense than in a hermeneutical-intensive or deconstructive sense. Instead of reacting to *anomie* by seeking out collective representations and legally solidified social facts on the premise that the discovery of any stable statistics in these regards is enough to prove that we each have a more or less certain existence only in and through an enduring society, that is, instead of merely depending upon statistics in this way as even a hermeneuticist or deconstructionist can routinely do in a context of practical politics, Tarde proposed a project of rethinking the provenance of statistics under

conditions of de facto instability, spontaneity and dramatic inventiveness (1903). Not to give in to desperation, skepticism and malaise, but also to prevent reactionary forces, forces for so-called 'stability' from taking hold in an age of necessarily problematic borders, in the Tardian view the question of social quantity *has* to throw off its shackles of subservience to certain of our assumptions about the origins and qualities of our group representations (1903). The essence of Tarde's idea of repetition as foundational to social resemblances, and to social science in general, is his idea of the fluctuating continuity provided by the effective and resistant virtuality of social numbers. What Tarde is interested in is not simple quantification or the possibility of an empirical grasp of already constituted social configurations. He is rather concerned to identify the irreversible, virtual, and intensive effect of continuity that one cannot eliminate by attributing to those social numbers an abstract infinite divisibility. To the contrary, his interest lies in a continuity with which those very numbers must enter into an inclusive, meaning-constitutive relation of co-dependence. One might say that Tarde is interested not so much in the volume and density as in the *power* in social numbers.

If Latour, Alliez and Deleuze can help us to understand today's fraught geo-political world by providing such a fresh – and perhaps to some, strange – angle upon the question of the social under conditions of modernity, it is because they have been motivated by Tarde's argument contra Durkheim. Tarde's argument is that Durkheim's idea of moral solidarity – a *qualitative* unity – is held by Durkheim to be absolute in the sense in which one might assert that, while particular qualities fade, nevertheless quality in general is indispensable. However, according to Tarde, the persistence of moral solidarity is rather underwritten by the Leibnizian idea that facts (including social facts) are contingent compositions emerging out of a complex of difference and repetition. So while quality will always color the world and will always call again and again for the affirmation of relation and comparison, affirming also thereby a necessary illusion of shifting moral solidarity, at the same time the underlying grounding of comparison is based on units which emerge prior to consciousness according to a subtractive calculus of need. The real changes take place on this latter level of need. The implication is that we must then disagree with Durkheim that particular configurations will, over time, create a post-emotional reality, fixed against all particular new movements, which becomes the main point of contact between sociologists and the world. But it is admittedly difficult then to see what role is left for sociology.

One clue toward a possible productive outcome of Tardian theorization lies in its affirmation of the theme of immanence as an alternative to the Durkheimian pathos. The theme of immanence is linked with Tarde's exposé of the aporia of unity in Durkheim's key theory of mechanical solidarity. My judgement is that Tarde is for contemporary sociologists highly worth reading because he usefully exposes this aporia from a rather rare and interesting point of view which does not require us to embrace

skepticism with respect to the ontology of the social. Once we try on the Tardian hypothesis, it becomes revealed that the aporia of unity is not lost in some sort of abstract pre-history but rather stems from an unresolvable equivocation that we all tend to make, when we think of unity, between the concept of *diversity* and the concept of *origin*. The Tardian questions that stem from such an hypothesis are quite invigorating. We all live by an implicit social philosophy and all social philosophy presumes some conception of unity, but do we think we form a coherent group because we all, at an archeological level deep beneath our epistemic certainty, have a common pre-history? Or do we perceive ourselves as displaying a measure of unity because just by chance we, as different peoples, are born and fall into common boundaries? Tarde not only exposes these two formulations as anti-numerate and naively numerate, respectively, but he further exposes the fallacy of equating these two formulations in enjoining us not to naively link history and geography. He exposes how, to think like a Durkheimian, to believe in moral solidarity as a benchmark against which one measures the difference between the normal and the pathological, exactly requires such a naivety.

The primary significance of Tarde in the contemporary period, in sum, lies in the way Tarde has provided useful concepts for the framing of a continuity in the human need to encounter and engage with social ontology but without falling back upon traditional spatial-metaphorical terms. The difficulties with Tarde's way of thematizing immanence are mainly on the side of the problematic of resemblance, and how this problem tends to arise again and again to undermine any attainment of a stable theory of difference based upon the concept of repetition. I think there are at least two reasons for this that we ought to make explicit. First, there is always the problem of institutional mediation. The Tardian proposal is that we can reformulate the need to theorize institutions as a problem of middle-range organization and place at the center of the latter problem the agency of the family model. However, many kinds of institutions, even highly organized ones, cannot be accounted for this way, even if we take the family model as simply a reference to some sort of ever-present dynamic of hierarchical ordering versus subversion. There is also in this Tardian prioritization of the family, if taken naively, a considerable potential for the distortion of some issues, particularly that of gender. The privilege of the male in gender relations under conditions of resemblance repetitions is a problem precisely for many families and for many communities. Repetition in social affairs is not some neutral, gender-free event. And the concept of repetition could, by express aim and by definition, have no philosophical content apart from that which is meant to inhere in the particulars repeated. So the paradox is that social research into gender and power discrimination requires that we forgo the idea of an open-ended plane of social affairs merely dotted with cases of discrimination that could, in principle, be snuffed out, and take the step of conceiving the problem rather as a whole complex pathology that will be ever-challenging for us to one extent or another. More to the point, even if

one such as Deleuze attempts to jettison the family model and conceive differentiation more strictly and rigorously as an immanent, self-doubling and self-subverting process by conceiving it as a constant breaking away from various models and a constant constitution of new and temporarily autonomous figures, we are still left with the fact that the concept of immanence here has a primitive component, via Tarde, in the idea of the link between the model and the example of the family that still needs to be much more fully problematized.

Nevertheless, we have now the resources, and perhaps also the need, to take a new look at a radical Tardian anti-sociologism *within* the sociological movement which voiced the aporia of unity and the attendant problem of the nature of social numbers that Durkheimians seemed all-too-ready to answer for with a naive fetish of statistics. It is, in the end, of course impossible to will away the need to speak of social concepts that transcend our individual desires. Even a desire for unconditional world peace has to be qualified by hard thinking at times. But it may very well be possible, and indeed crucial, to avoid attributing a universal representational quality to those socially useful concepts that filter through to us in this process. One strategy for doing away with this representationalism is to take on board a way of understanding the world in which concepts are turned into hopeful mesmerizations which glimmer before us as so many promises emanating from cutting-edge male figures. It seems to me that this model, and Tarde's thought which is so well disposed toward it, should never be seen as simply a legitimate source of theoretical power, but that much rather it can and ought to be taken as a point of departure for re-problematizing the *fin-de-siècle* setting of the origins of the sociological and social-philosophical movements. One might hope, in the latter context, that the cause of a richer sociological theory of difference will be sought and encouraged.

Note

1. See Bruno Latour's 'Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social' (2002), which is the first-ever extended commentary on Tarde in English and will likely precipitate a widening discourse on Tarde. For the first publication in English on Tarde's recent reception see my own review article 'The Renaissance of *Philosophie Tardienne*' (Toews, 1999). In that article I review Tarde's *Monadologie et Sociologie* (1999). In his important introduction to that recent re-release of Tarde's essay, Éric Alliez makes reference to a '*mouvement récent de rédecouverte de cette oeuvre*'. Alliez refers to three other recent re-publications of Tarde's books: *L'Opinion et la foule* (1991); *Les Lois de l'imitation* (1993), *Les Transformations du droit* (1994); and several slightly less recent secondary sources including *Écrits de psychologie sociale* (Rocheblave and Milet, 1973) and *Fragment d'histoire future* (Rocheblave and Milet, 1980). Deleuze's most significant comments on Tarde are in *Difference and Repetition* (1994: 313–14) and in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 218–19). M. Lazaretto's *Puissances de l'invention* (2002) can also be read in the light of the new reception of Tarde.

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