Urban Imitations

Tarde's Sociology Revisited

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> His works breathe love of cities. (Everett C. Hughes on Gabriel Tarde; Hughes, 1961: 558)

AFTER MANY years in oblivion, Gabriel Tarde's (1843–1904) sociology has experienced a revival over the last few years, even outside France. Granted, over the years Tarde's theory has had a role to play within criminology and innovation and diffusion research, just as various applications of and references to his work have occasionally appeared in general social theory (see, e.g., Barrows, 1981; Leys, 1993; Williams, 1982). Only recently, however, has a systematic scrutiny of Tarde's thought begun, inspired not least by the republication of Tarde's oeuvre in France, led by Éric Alliez. Alliez and a number of other prominent scholars read Tarde through Gilles Deleuze, the real key figure behind the renewed interest in the theoretician, who in the history of social thought is best known as Émile Durkheim's failed adversary. But how can it be that Tarde's sociology is flourishing only now when Deleuze already praised him back in 1968 (see the famous footnote in Deleuze, 1994: 313–14)? One explanation could be that Michel Foucault's prophecy is finally coming true, that the 20th century is at long last 'known as Deleuzian' (1998: 343), for this recognition naturally leads to an examination of Tarde, to whom Deleuze was greatly indebted (Alliez, 2004). However, the new interest in Tarde may also be due to the fact that the *Zeitgeist* is simply in favour of Tarde's project. Formulating grand theory, for example, is no longer an entirely illegitimate or suspicious enterprise. The 1960s and 1970s critique of Talcott Parsons' work in particular now seems so tied to its time that there is once again room for ambitious general theories, such as Niklas Luhmann's (1995) systems theory, Harrison C. White's (1992) network theory, but also Tarde's sociology – even if these positions are far from being mainstream.

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In this article, I will show that Tarde's social theory does in fact deserve rehabilitation in the contemporary theoretical landscape, as it combines and transcends important debates of the present. Contrary to the current reception of Tarde, however, my argument is not based primarily on Deleuzian philosophy, but takes a more sociological starting point, Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. The article is organized around two main purposes. First, it aims to show that Tarde is fundamentally occupied with formulating a pure sociology of societal imitation that takes into account communication and spatiality. Thus, drawing on Luhmann's radical distinction between psychic and social systems, new light is shed on Tarde's project and it is demonstrated that Tarde should not be dismissed through reference to his ostensible psychologism. On the contrary, Tarde distinguishes sharply between invention, which is not social, and imitation, which is a purely social phenomenon. Like Luhmann, Tarde is even concerned with the sociological significance of communication. Despite their shared focus on communication, however, crucial differences can be identified between Tarde and Luhmann, particularly concerning questions of spatiality and urbanity. While Luhmann refuses to assign spatiality a prominent position in his conception of communication, Tarde argues that, in modernity, cities have acquired a very significant importance in what is actually communicated or, in Tarde's terminology, imitated.

While the first goal of this article is thus to place Tarde in the context of contemporary social theory and demonstrate that Tardean thought is compatible with current sociological trends, the second purpose is to go beyond the prevalent discussions of today. Two issues in particular will be extracted from Tarde's theory and put on the theoretical and analytical agenda, crowds and rhythms. Tarde devotes much interest to the phenomenon of crowds. According to Tarde, crowds are first of all an urban incident, but, more than that, one might even claim that they express a simultaneous manifestation and destruction of the social. By drawing on Tarde's theory of crowds, and demonstrating how it is linked to his theory of urban imitations, it is argued that a general theory of society must be able to account for the existence of crowds.

Needless to say, the article does not claim that Tarde is relevant in all areas today. And even if his theory offers a valuable starting point, inviting us to reflect on and challenge what are otherwise held to be mainstream sociological truths, in several respects, it does appear rather outdated (reading Tarde with regard to gender, for example, would not come out to his advantage). In the final section of the article, therefore, the aim is to replace Tarde's focus on the scientific laws that govern imitations – which is no longer convincing – with a more explicit view on how structures condition imitations. More specifically, the contention is, drawing upon Henri Lefebvre, to outline a perspective of how to incorporate a structural dimension of imitations, which is only insufficiently developed in Tarde. To put it briefly, the article suggests that a contemporary Tardean approach seeking to analyse imitations, spatiality and crowds may take the form of a

rhythmanalysis that focuses on how rhythms simultaneously condition imitations and produce ruptures.

A Pure Sociology

Gabriel Tarde's ambitious aim is to formulate a '*pure sociology*' or 'a general sociology', capturing the common character of all social relations and, hence, applying to every social phenomenon (Tarde, 1962: ix–x). According to Tarde, a theory of action cannot fulfil this goal and references to the merits of great men or any kind of methodological individualism serve little purpose (1962: 1–2). Instead, he develops a cosmological theory of universal repetition from which he extracts the matter which, he believes, constitutes the social, imitation. Imitation is defined as 'the action at a distance of one mind upon another' (1962: xiv). In *Laws of Imitation* from 1890, Tarde likens this social repetition to somnambulism or hypnosis, both much-debated concepts by the end of the 19th century, and he even elevates it to be the defining characteristic of society, '*Society is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism*' (1962: 87).

Even if Tarde is cautious not to derive the social and society from individual actors,[1] this should not lead us to believe that the individual is deprived of any (active) role. Quite the opposite, Tarde is very concerned with analysing the individual's inventions. According to Tarde, however, these remain embedded in a purely individual logic – only when an invention is imitated does it assume a social character (see Tarde, 1962: xxii, 382). This relationship between the individual on the one hand and social imitation on the other has caused much confusion, fostering the critique that Tarde's sociological programme is really nothing but a psychologism in disguise. Deleuze's interpretation is helpful precisely on this point, as he refutes a superficial reading of what is at stake:

> It is completely wrong to reduce Tarde's sociology to a psychologism or even an interpsychology. Tarde criticizes Durkheim for assuming what must be explained – namely, 'the similarity of thousands of men'. For the alternative – impersonal givens or the Ideas of great men – he substitutes the little ideas of little men, the little inventions and interferences between imitative currents. *What Tarde inaugurates is a microsociology*, which is not necessarily concerned with what happens between individuals but with what happens within a single individual: for example, hesitation understood as 'infinitesimal social opposition', or invention as 'infinitesimal social adaptation'. (1994: 314, note 3)

Deleuze builds his argument on one paragraph in particular in Tarde's *Social Laws*, where Tarde discusses the 'fundamental social opposition', 'this miniature internal battle', that arises when opposing imitative rays interfere within the individual consciousness (Tarde, 1899: 83ff.). Even if Deleuze's interpretation is very stimulating, and endorsed by several scholars (Boyer, 2001; Toews, 2003), it tends to ignore or at least displace the focus from the condition of possibility of this microsociology and, consequently, from

what distinguishes the 'fundamental social opposition' from its 'purely psychological' counterpart (Tarde, 1899: 99). As a result, as Toews (2003: 91) remarks, the Deleuzian elucidation might tempt some to persist considering the individual as the pivotal point. Toews therefore finds himself compelled to explain what separates the Deleuzian–Tardean microsociology from traditional sociological interactionism (2003: 91–2). But perhaps the distinctively sociological in Tarde can be extracted in different ways that better shed light on the nature of his programme. Bruno Latour, for example, has recently demonstrated that Tarde's work may be regarded as a precursor of actor network theory (Latour, 2002). Latour finds in Tarde a congenial thinker who 'does not respect any border between nature and society', and who – as I already hinted at – does not derive the part from the whole, but claims that 'the smaller is always the bigger entity' (Latour, 2002: 119, 121). Latour also defends Tarde against the accusation of an inherent psychologism by referring to Tarde's rejection of intra-psychology. Yet, even Latour remains unclear about how exactly to conceive of the distinction between intra-psychology and sociology in the Tardean sense.

The interpretations by Deleuze and Latour are, indeed, very stimulating, and each point to ways of giving a voice to Tarde in contemporary social theory in line with Tarde's own thought. Nevertheless, I opt for a different starting point. Thus, the claim of the following is that by turning for a moment to Niklas Luhmann's sociology, one might acquire new and illuminating perspectives on Tarde's project. The reference to Luhmann may surprise at first, as the Tardean insights that are emphasized by Deleuze and Latour definitely seem at odds with strict systemic propositions.[2] Nor are Tarde and Luhmann easily compatible, for which reason I shall also merely point out structural affinities below. This notwithstanding, observing Tarde from a Lumannian angle has two immediate advantages as compared with a Deleuzian or Latourian approach. First, a comparison with systems theory affords the most clear-cut demonstration of why Tarde is not caught in a trap of psychologism, but does, in fact, lay out a pure sociology. Second, Luhmann's focus on communication naturally invites us to explore the status of communication in Tarde, an issue that is hardly discussed in the interpretations by Deleuze and Latour. Hence, when I suggest a Luhmannian take on Tarde, the intention is neither to turn Tarde's sociology into a general Luhmannian programme nor to force upon Tarde systemic demarcations that are incompatible with his theory. The idea is rather to provide a purely sociological argument for Tarde's pure sociology, and to point to dimensions of his work that do not get much attention in the current reception. Against this background, we may then look into some of the many ways in which Tarde's work differs from contemporary social theory, including Luhmann's systems theory.

One of Luhmann's greatest theoretical accomplishments is the formulation of a sociology which, in an immensely consequential manner, makes communication the fundamental concept. Social systems are, Luhmann says, communication systems. Communication is the social, and society is

nothing but communication. Moreover, only communication communicates, not human beings. This provocative hypothesis – which associates Luhmann with Tarde's ambition of outlining a pure sociology that does not pivot around the human being or any other biological or physical phenomena, but places human subjects *outside* society and the social – implies a sharp distinction between psychic and social systems that constitute each other's environment. Thus, according to Luhmann, no permanent overlaps exist between the self-referential operations of psychic and social systems, that is, between consciousness and communication. Both kinds of systems are operationally closed and function in a purely self-organizing and autopoietic manner, so that consciousness connects recursively with consciousness, and communication with communication. However, this operational closure does not mean that psychic and social systems are entirely independent of one another. On the contrary, Luhmann stresses their reciprocal relationship through the concept of interpenetration, referring to how each system places its complexity at the disposal of the other, thereby enabling reciprocal evolution or, more specifically, co-evolution (Luhmann, 1995: 210ff.).

Luhmann's theory adds to our understanding of Tarde in two ways. First, it incites us to conceive of imitation as a truly recursive phenomenon. Just as communication has its only foundation in communication, imitation seems primarily to occur due to imitation. Granted, an invention is imitated a first time, Tarde would say, but subsequent imitations are just as much imitations of the imitation as of the initial invention. When only the social process has begun, imitation becomes a self-organizing force of its own – you imitate because others imitate. In Tarde's own words, 'three-quarters of the time we obey a man because we see him obeyed by others' (1969: 314, 1989: 123). Second, one may argue that Tarde's analysis of the relation between imitation and invention is structurally equivalent to the simultaneous self-reference and co-dependency of psychic and social systems. On the one hand, imitation and invention are each ascribed a level of reality of their own. Whereas imitation constitutes the social, 'what remains locked up in the mind of its creator, has no social value' (Tarde, 1899: 166). In fact, Tarde states, to innovate is to be 'super-social rather than social' (1962: 88). Consequently, Tarde is not caught in any psychological line of reasoning; his sociology of imitation is, indeed, a pure sociology. On the other hand, the two levels of reality condition one another. In the words of Boyer, 'Invention only arises through repetition, but repetition has its only source in innovation' (2001: 190).[3]

However, there is perhaps more than a structural similarity at stake between communication and imitation. Thus, imitation itself requires a medium, the most important of which is communication. To put it in Kantian terminology, the medium of communication constitutes the condition of possibility of imitation. This is no arbitrary supposition (although Tarde is not always very explicit on this point). In an albeit negative formulation, for example, Tarde stresses that '[l]ack of communication . . . hinders imitation' (1962: 115). Hence, following Schmitz (1987: 287), one may even argue that

Tarde not only inaugurates a particular microsociology but also, and more significantly, is envisioning an entire sociology of communication. In fact, Tarde seems to suggest a twofold sociology of communication: a sociological programme that is fundamentally based on the concept of communication, and a sociology of how specific modes of communication evolve. While his most important work on imitation, *Laws of Imitation*, contains no extensive treatment of the relationship between communication and imitation (but several on language and imitation), the whole issue of communication is analysed in his later writings on conversation (Tarde, 1989: 86ff., partly translated in Tarde, 1969). Without digging too deeply into this part of his work, it is worth noting that the analysis of conversation captures both dimensions of his sociology of communication. On the one hand, conversation is described abstractly as the 'elementary social relation' and as 'the strongest agent of imitation' (Tarde, 1989: 30, 87, cf. 1969: 308). On the other hand, Tarde offers here a very stimulating account of the transformations of and differences in conversation in various social settings, including, for example, those between urban and rural areas. Yet even if Hughes is right in observing that Tarde 'is, among pioneer sociologists, the one who thought of communication . . . as the central object of study and who worked out a set of basic concepts and problems to that end' (1961: 557), it should be emphasized that Tarde's theory of communication remains scantly elaborated as compared with more recent theoretical approaches. In Luhmann, for example, communication is not just conceived of as a necessary medium; it is the ultimate element of social systems. Whilst Tarde is therefore not as radical as Luhmann, he does suggest a research agenda that focuses on the intricate relation between imitation and communication.

Urban Imitations

So far, the aim has been to demonstrate that Tarde, like Luhmann, not only dissociates himself from methodological individualism, actor-centred sociology, etc. but also points to communication as the basis upon which a general theory of society must be formulated. But Tarde even goes beyond this assertion and stresses the urban anchoring of imitation, whereby he approaches the spatial turn of contemporary social theory. This double focus on communication and urbanity is rather uncommon, even according to present standards. Thus, Luhmann argues that generally space has lost its theoretical importance, for communication systems 'are not at all limited in space' (1997: 76). Even if Luhmann is probably the most extreme advocate of this point of view, the situation is not fundamentally different when it comes to other leading figures within the linguistic turn.[4]

What does Tarde have to say about space then? In fact, his observations on imitation and spatiality, or rather urbanity, are embedded in a theory of societal modernization. Yet before going into that, two general features of imitation should be highlighted that regard what may be termed the principle of a direction of imitation. First, imitation takes place *ab interioribus ad exteriora*, meaning, for example, that the imitation of ideas occurs prior to

the imitation of their expression (Tarde, 1962: 207). Second, and of greater importance in our context, imitation is said to radiate from the superior to the inferior. Imitation often occurs against the background of a hierarchical structure, which is levelled in the course of time as the spread of imitation dissolves the initial difference between the superior and the inferior. Tarde provides a number of examples of this process, for example, the imitation of the father by the son, of the beloved by the lover and of court manners by the common people.

In his historical account of what counts as superior and inferior, Tarde diagnoses a change between what, according to Luhmann, may be called hierarchically differentiated societies on the one hand, and modern, that is, functionally differentiated societies, on the other. In the former, nobility reigns. Here, superiority is attributed to individuals, classes, etc. that are imitated due to this very superiority. However, by the transition to modernity, the classical nobility loses its imitation-generating capacity. This in no way means that the imitation processes thereby end, or that the principle of a direction of imitation is abolished. Rather, the point from which imitation radiates moves, in that, as Tarde claims, it no longer consists of specific groups or individuals to whom superiority is ascribed, but of *cities*. Thus the city, 'this aristocracy of place' (Tarde, 1962: 225), constitutes the modern era's functional equivalent of the classical nobility. In an almost breathless description of this transformation, Tarde portrays the significance of Paris as follows:

> Paris unquestionably rules more royally and more orientally over the provinces than the court ever ruled over the city. Every day the telegraph or the railroad distributes its readymade ideas, wishes, conversations, revolutions, its readymade dresses and furniture, throughout the whole of France. The suggestive and imperious fascination which it instantaneously exerts over this vast territory is so profound, so complete, and so sustained, that it no longer surprises anyone. This kind of magnetisation has become chronic. (1962: 226)

By ascribing the city a dominant status as the point of radiation of imitation, Tarde reveals a clear metropolitan bias in his theory of modernization in which his concerns with spatial matters mainly pivot around the performances of great cities. This is only accentuated by a self-reinforcing dynamic, which, according to Tarde, makes the city the breeding ground and engine for both inventions and their imitations. '[A]bove all,' Tarde states, 'the cities attract to themselves from all directions the most active brains and the most nervous organisms, the fittest to utilise modern inventions' (1962: 228). This description of the self-generating agglomeration of cities, of the city as the locus of creativity and development, brings Tarde surprisingly close to a whole branch of contemporary urban theory that stresses the agglomeration effects of cities (see, e.g., Scott, 1999; and critical towards such positions, Amin and Thrift, 2002: 56ff.).

While Luhmann asserts that in the transition to modernity, *l'ancien régime* is replaced by a functional differentiation where not only classical nobility but also spatiality become less important, Tarde reasons differently. It actually seems as if Tarde's observations point less to the epochal ruptures between tradition and modernity and more to the continuity in this transition, where the basic functions of the centre from which imitation radiates remain the same. Despite identifying this functional equivalence, Tarde also stresses actual changes that associate him with Luhmann. They would agree, for instance, that superiority is no longer predetermined by hereditary rank and blood. Instead, modernity is characterized by an increasing democratization, since everyone can obtain at least momentary superiority in the city (see Tarde, 1962: 225ff.). Most importantly, therefore, under modernity interest is changing from the great to the little men. Tarde illustrates this change in relation to the crime problem. Whereas the different kinds of criminal activity previously radiated from the nobility to the people, by the transition to modernity, they radiate from the cities to the provinces. Tarde cites an example from Paris, 1825, where a young nurse – a little woman! – Henriette Cornier, 'cruelly put to death a child of which she had the care; not long afterwards, other children's nurses yielded, for no other reason than this, to an irresistible desire to cut the throats of their employers' children' (1968: 340).

Readers familiar with the work of Michel Foucault might recognize the name of Henriette Cornier. Her case appears in a brilliant article on the emergence of legal psychiatry that Foucault published in 1978, and it is given a key role in one of his recently published lectures from the Collège de France in 1975, on which the later article is based (Foucault, 1978, 2003). Foucault's analysis is particularly exciting, because it offers a very interesting support of Tarde's suggestion, that little men and women may have a significant influence on shaping the radiation of imitations. Foucault thus demonstrates how the act of Henriette Cornier triggered a crisis in penal law of the time, since no motive or interest behind the murder could be identified. This laid the foundation of a complex development, including not only the introduction of psychiatry into penal law but also the emergence of the concept of instincts. Foucault even draws links from Cornier to two later technologies of instincts that emerged at the end of the 19th century, eugenics and psychoanalysis (Foucault, 2003: 133). I cannot dwell on this development but need only remark that, according to Foucault's investigation, it emerged with Henriette Cornier killing the neighbour's daughter. Or, to put it into Tardean terminology, Cornier's criminal act, which in the context of crime at the time constituted an invention, became so crucial for the later events not because of the act itself, but because it was imitated.

As should be clear by now, Tarde's theory of imitation is intimately linked to an interest in the city.[5] But how should urban imitations be characterized and analysed more specifically? The following section will focus not on the imitation of the city by the provinces, but on imitation processes

taking place within the city. Tarde brings to light one particular urban *phenomenon*, the crowd, that presents an exemplary realization of imitation. After demonstrating how urban imitation assumes one of its most manifest forms in the crowd, I then go somewhat beyond Tarde in the attempt to outline an analytical *perspective* with which to diagnose urban imitations, a rhythmanalysis. The crowd theory and the rhythmanalysis both present alternatives, or at least supplements, to current mainstream sociology.

Urban Crowds

If the role of space is attributed only little importance in the branch of contemporary social theory which forms part of the linguistic turn, this is even more the case for the phenomenon of crowds. For more than half a century, the concept of crowds has been practically expelled from social theory, and none of the grand theorists of our time (Habermas, Luhmann, Bourdieu, White, etc.) reflects systematically about the crowd. This was not always so. By the end of the 19th century, and thus in many ways parallel with the emergence of sociology, an intense discussion about crowds and their societal (not least political-revolutionary) significance took place, where the crowds were primarily observed as a pathological incident (Stäheli, 2003). The most famous figures in these debates were Gustave Le Bon, Scipio Sighele and Gabriel Tarde (an excellent account of their positions, and of the history of crowd theory in general, is provided by van Ginneken, 1992). Despite its influence on American sociology, propagated by Robert E. Park for instance, the concept of crowds slowly disappeared and was displaced by an interest in group dynamics, social movements, etc. This is not the place to analyse the background of this historical development. Instead, my investigation will be limited to what Tarde has to say about crowds and their imitative capacities. Drawing upon Tarde's observations, I suggest that the sociology of crowds should be put back on the theoretical agenda.

Some of the earliest texts on crowds by Tarde are part of his criminological project and concern the question of criminal crowds (Tarde, 1892, 1893). Tarde's theory of crowds also contains more general discussions, though, which go far beyond criminology. In fact, Tarde considers the crowd a cornerstone of the social, just as it is claimed to constitute a characteristic phenomenon of the city. Regarding the former aspect, Tarde argues there are 'two distinct germs of societies, the family and the mob' (1968: 325). The family and the mob, or crowd, are similar in the sense that they are both prototypical centres from where suggestion radiates. In the family, Tarde says, the child imitates the father; in the crowd, the crowd members imitate a leader. However, there are also crucial differences between the crowd and the family. The rationality that characterizes the latter is claimed to bring about an imitation of custom, which endows it with a conservative air. In contrast, Tarde assigns a revolutionary-transformative character to the crowd, as its rationality is embodied in fashion-imitation (1968: 326). The logic of the crowd thus constantly promotes change and imitation of

ever-new inventions. According to Tarde, this difference between the family and the crowd is also reflected in terms of how the two are spatially situated. The rationality of the family, he states, is predominant in the countryside, whereas the city is characterized by the rationality of the crowd. Tarde does not argue that crowd phenomena cannot be observed in non-modern or rural settings. However, the modern city, with its numerous inhabitants and public places, simply provides a perfect breeding ground for the formation of crowds. But how does the crowd actually form?

> A *mob* is a strange phenomenon. It is a gathering of heterogeneous elements, unknown to one another; but as soon as a spark of passion, having flashed out from one of these elements, electrifies this confused mass, there takes place a sort of sudden organization, a spontaneous generation. This incoherence becomes cohesion, this noise becomes a voice, and these thousands of men crowded together soon form but a single animal, a wild beast without a name, which marches to its goal with an irresistible finality. The majority of these men had assembled out of pure curiosity, but the fever of some of them soon reached the minds of all, and in all of them there arose a delirium. (Tarde, 1968: 323)

This quote reveals why Tarde has a general interest in the crowd, for imitation, and therefore sociality, find one of their most complete, practical forms in the crowd. Theoretically, the 'perfect and absolute' mode of sociality 'would consist of such an intense concentration of urban life that as soon as a good idea arose in one mind it would be instantaneously transmitted to all minds throughout the city' (Tarde, 1962: 70). But if this is, indeed, a hypothetical situation, is the crowd not one of the closest approximations to pure sociality in real life? I, for one, would claim that this is what Tarde seems to suggest in his early writings. Thus, the self-organizing power of the crowd, called forth by a single act, which spontaneously brings together otherwise different individuals in a common suggestion, may not cover the entire city, but often includes a considerable part of it. In other words, the city is the scene of the powerful suggestion of crowds and, hence, of probably the most radical, yet simultaneously the most momentary, manifestation and materialization of sociality in modern society.

Even if one accepts this interpretation, one must be careful not to propose a clear-cut historical development from custom-imitation in the rural family to fashion-imitation in the urban crowd, arguing that the latter gradually replaces the former. Tarde is cautious about stressing, first, the recurring oscillation between the two forms of imitation, custom and fashion, and, second, that custom-imitation is ultimately 'preponderant in social life' (1962: 246, see also 249, 253–4, 342–3). In terms of the crowd, for example, he states that even if it emerges independently of the family, its maintenance relies on 'the aid of the family' (1968: 325). The way in which Tarde attributes an ultimate significance to custom-imitation in the family exposes a conservative bias in his theory. This bias is particularly apparent in his descriptions of crowd behaviour. Thus, the crowd may produce a temporary

and significant discharge of imitation (sociality), but Tarde is nevertheless anxious about its ravages. After all, crowd members are described as being in a state of delirium, constituting a wild, uncontrollable beast (hence also Tarde's focus on criminal crowds). The problem is that crowds, through their contagious effects, act with less morality and 'intelligence than the individuals which compose them would do separately' (Tarde, 1903: 80). What we face here is a paradox in Tarde's account of the crowd (see also Stäheli, 2003). He is at once fascinated and petrified by crowds. On the one hand, his imitation theory seems to suggest that the crowd expresses an absolute form of sociality, at least considered from a non-normative point of view. On the other hand, however, Tarde fears the crowd's destructive tendencies and his conservatism therefore forces him to normatively argue for ways of oppressing the crowd.

The point I wish to make here is that we need not subscribe to Tarde's conservative-reactionary point of view. What is interesting about his analysis of crowds is not the normative concerns as such – here Tarde is not very different from most of his contemporaries. More important, one might detect in Tarde a crucial observation on the social, namely its paradoxical constitution: the crowd is not only attributed a significant role in understanding the social, it even demonstrates its breakdown. The crowd simultaneously presents the manifestation and the destruction of the social. In other words, the crowd is a figure of the *paradox of the social*. Thus, Tarde's analysis proposes that, due to its extreme sociality, the crowd undermines the normal, everyday imitation processes in the city, which may be the reason why crowd phenomena have been expelled from mainstream sociology. For what Tarde calls attention to is that urban life cannot be reduced to an interaction order *à la* Erving Goffman. Goffman himself is perfectly aware of this, lucidly stating it in his introduction to *Behavior in Public Places*: 'It is well recognized, for instance, that mobs can suddenly emerge from the peaceful flow of human traffic, if conditions are right. But little concern seems to have been given to the question of what structure this peaceful intercourse possesses when mob formation is not an issue' (1963: 4). In Goffman, therefore, the focus is repositioned to peaceful imitation processes, and he only deals with minor offences against this order. Reflecting on the present theoretical situation, however, it seems as if Goffmanian interaction analysis has entirely replaced and excluded what it set out merely to supplement. The preference for the peaceful and the normal has simply forced out the crowd from social theory. But the question is, now, whether it is not about time to put back on the agenda this extreme discharge of sociality that suspends the discomfort of reciprocal touching and perceptions of strangers' body heat. The crowd may act destructively; it may seem anti-social and parasitic-pathological. But if, as some of Tarde's writings suggest, it actually embodies the social and condenses the urban imitations in their practically purest form, are we not, then, obliged once again to make room for the crowd in social theory? Is an understanding and inclusion of the sociality of the crowd not exactly the litmus test that a general theory of

society must pass? And is not the crowd the ultimate illustration of the paradox of the social, that its very manifestation bears the seeds of its own destruction?

Urban Rhythms: Analysing the Structures of Urban Imitations

If we accept that the social is constituted by imitation and if we, furthermore, subscribe to the thesis that, in modern society, imitation processes are closely tied to cities and even manifest in urban crowds, then the question arises of how to analyse these imitations more specifically. One possibility is to follow Tarde's example and explore the scientific laws that regulate imitation processes. Here, Tarde speaks of logical and extra-logical laws. The former are current when an invention is imitated because it is believed to contribute with a higher utility, or because it is thought to solve a problem better than other inventions. According to Tarde, however, the imitation of a particular invention is often caused by extra-logical incentives that are not rooted in rational or deliberate considerations, but rather in more culturally defined reasons – like the imitation of the nobility or cities. Another possibility is to do without the idea of scientific laws and, instead, change the focus to the flexible structures that regulate concrete imitation processes. Tarde's theory of imitation does not include a strong explicit notion of structures and how they condition imitations. The final section of this article aims to suggest how such a structural dimension may be incorporated in Tarde. In other words, the goal is to elaborate on the change in perspective just mentioned; that is, replacing Tarde's mapping of the logical and extra-logical laws of imitation, which now appear outdated, with a more openly conceived approach that explicitly focuses on the structures that condition and regulate imitation, but which at the same time takes into account the contingency and variability of imitation dynamics. More specifically, the suggestion is that one way of re-establishing Tarde in the contemporary theoretical landscape could come about through a *rhythm-analysis* of imitation – which would also endow the Tardean perspective with greater diagnostic powers.

Actually, the concept of rhythms does occur now and then in Tarde, but it is rarely treated systematically. There is no doubt, however, that he himself considered imitation processes rhythmlogically. In a discussion of the extra-logical laws of fashion- and custom-imitation, for example, he states that 'however slender this stream [of fashion] may be, its work of inundation or irrigation is considerable, and it behoves us to study its periodic rises and falls in the very irregular kind of rhythm in which they occur' (1962: 244–5). In other words, Tarde acknowledges the possibility, if not need, of analysing the 'rhythmical repetition' and the 'rhythmical oscillations' of imitations (1962: 295, 346). The concept of rhythms is also used in connection with two other basic dimensions of Tarde's system, opposition and adaptation. Oppositions occur when imitative rays interfere (this is where Deleuze's interpretation of Tarde comes in). Tarde lists two kinds of so-called dynamic oppositions, those which occur simultaneously, and those

which follow successively. Simultaneous oppositions are the prototype of the Deleuzian–Tardean hesitation: I hesitate because I, in this very moment, experience conflicting desires. The temporal contrast to this is succession, and this is where Tarde places rhythm. Rhythmic opposition occurs, for example, in the shifting economic inflation and deflation, or when individuals oscillate between joy and sorrow (Tarde, 1999: 72, 258). More normal, though, are rhythmic adaptations, that is, situations where the opposition generates new inventions that establish harmony rather than opposition (Tarde, 1902b: 190).

We see, then, that Tarde adds to his sociology an explicitly temporal dimension and that he links the concept of rhythms to all three levels of imitation, opposition and adaptation. This said, however, it must be admitted that Tarde's considerations of rhythms are very scanty. It is simply unclear what analytical and theoretical status the rhythm concept occupies in Tarde's system. Let me therefore outline the contours of a structural dimension of imitation processes by supplying Tarde's approach with a more elaborated perspective on rhythms (for the sake of simplicity, I shall focus solely on the level of imitation and hence ignore oppositions and adaptations).

The following remarks pivot around some crucial aspects of the rhythm analysis that Henri Lefebvre has developed. Early on, Lefebvre realized that a 'general rhythmology' might supply him with the final part of his investigations of the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991: 205, 405). But only in his late work, published posthumously in part, and partly co-authored by Catherine Régulier, did he elaborate on rhythmanalysis in depth (Lefebvre, 2004; Lefebvre and Régulier, 1996, 1999). Even if Lefebvre conceives of rhythmanalysis as a transdisciplinary approach that transcends the boundaries of biology, sociology, etc. (and which, as such, is not dissimilar to Tarde's cosmological starting point) the specific rhythmanalyses centre on (urban) everyday life. The study of everyday rhythms offers the link to Lefebvre's general critical enterprise, for capitalism has, he says, transformed the rhythms of everyday life and embedded them in the capitalistic mode of production. Clearly, these neo-Marxist undertones do not fit very well with Tarde's project, but they endow Lefebvre's analysis with an interesting diagnostic aptitude. This will be addressed again below, but first, two general dimensions of Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis will be explored, which specify what a Tardean analysis of urban rhythms would have to include.[6]

First of all, while every rhythm depends on repetition – or, in the Tardean model of social repetition, imitation – not all repetitions bring about rhythms. According to Lefebvre, repetition that occurs mechanically and deterministically does not produce a rhythm, for rhythm requires contingency. In the last analysis, rhythms are 'constituted of repetitions, ruptures, and surprises' (Lefebvre and Régulier, 1999: 9). Rhythms presuppose a before and an after, a temporal distinction between the repetition and the occurrence of what is repeated. But they also imply a continual displacement of what is repeated/imitated. In an almost Deleuzian formulation,

rhythms are said to be embedded in a problematic of repetition and becoming, of reproduction and difference (Lefebvre and Régulier, 1999: 9–10). Consequently, rhythm is the unity of the difference between repetition and difference. Hence, a rhythmanalysis should resist the temptation to observe simply how imitations allegedly create, reproduce and stabilize identities (through repetition). It must also take notice of the little differences and variations that are produced by the rhythms (the structures of imitation), which tend to continually destabilize the imitations and rhythms themselves and thereby enable the generation of new rhythms and imitations. Although Tarde is not as explicit on this point as are Lefebvre and Régulier, he nevertheless argues similarly when he stresses that rhythm 'appears only in the details of phenomena, as a condition of their exact repetition, and through this of their variation' (1899: 140).

In addition to stressing the contingency and variation of rhythms of imitation, Lefebvre's analysis points to an aspect that supplements Tarde's work on the spatiality of imitations, the relation between materiality and rhythms. In their analysis of Mediterranean cities, for example, Lefebvre and Régulier discuss the importance of stairs as an illustration of how architecture influences and connects rhythms. 'In Venice,' they ask, 'do not stairs rhythm the walk through the city, while at the same time serving as transition between different rhythms?' (1996: 237). What they suggest, in short, is that rhythms can be conditioned architecturally, that spatial design may enable certain rhythms to emerge and function as passages between rhythms. This poses yet another problematic concerning the power to act upon rhythms. Obviously, this is not only an issue in Lefebvre's work but also in approaches that are more explicitly concerned with questions of power. Thus, by analysing government (that is, power) as 'action at a distance', Nikolas Rose vividly illustrates how power is presently exercised through reconfigurations of urban space. The rhythms of urban everyday life are governed to facilitate smooth economic transactions and even 'to secure against the formation of crowds', criminal activity, etc. (Rose, 1999: 252). This perspective on the government at a distance of imitations and their rhythms fits well with Tarde's sociology, as he defines imitation as 'generation at a distance' (1962: 34). Hence, a Tardean analysis of the rhythmological character of imitations is perfectly compatible with observations of how imitations and rhythms are conditioned materially through powerful interventions in space.

The same goes for the construction of individual subjectivities. It has already been noted that Tarde does not consider the individual subject the ultimate unit in his sociology. On the contrary, he conceives of it as being constituted through imitation. Applying the rhythmanalysis, we may now record how this construction takes place, for in Tarde's social theory it is 'rhythms and interferences whose junction constitutes an individual' (Martin, 1999: 29).[7] In other words, as the individual does not exist prior to the rhythms but, on the contrary, is produced by them and their momentarily stabilized junctions, and since the subjectification of the individual

therefore changes as the rhythms and their junctions change, rhythmanalysis is not merely a perspective on imitations per se, but equally a tool to demonstrate a society's dominant ways of promoting subject positions. What is faced here is therefore a very far-reaching and radical microsociological approach: if we succeed in mapping the rhythms of imitation, we simultaneously chart the rhythms of the social and of society and thereby also those restrictions and possibilities, repetitions and differences, individuals are confronted with in particular contexts.

Finally, and very briefly, let me add that the sort of rhythmanalysis advocated here corresponds perfectly to the other parts of Tarde's theory discussed above. First, concerning communication, rhythmanalysis is ultimately an analysis of the structures of communicative imitations: how are imitations conditioned through rhythms? Second, as should already be clear, the urban dimension of Tarde's work is reinstated in the rhythmological diagnosis of how spatial designs are applied in order to govern imitation at a distance, through rhythms. Third, the rhythmanalysis is also compatible with crowd theory. This is particularly apparent when consulting Elias Canetti's phenomenological account of the crowd where he even speaks of *rhythmic* crowds. Such crowds are usually made up of only a small number of individuals, but they compensate for being few by a rhythmic stamping or dancing which is both very intense and contagious (Canetti, 1984: 31–4). In other words, these crowds organize their unity and contagious imitation through rhythm. Clearly, we face once again the materiality of a rhythmic imitation process that cannot be reduced to a quiet interaction order.

Conclusion

In this article, the complexity of Tarde's sociology has been reduced by deliberately ignoring some of the modifications that can be identified in his thought. In these concluding remarks, however, one important theoretical movement in Tarde, pointed out by van Ginneken (1992), will be emphasized and its implications for the preceding arguments of this article made clear. Van Ginneken draws our attention to a shift in Tarde's key concept, imitation. In the early works, including the first edition of *Laws of Imitation* from 1890, Tarde conceives of imitation through the notion of suggestion and likens, as we have seen, imitation to somnambulism. This conception of imitation undergoes a slight transformation in Tarde's subsequent works, including the second edition of *Laws of Imitation*, so that the suggestion aspect gradually recedes into the background in favour of a more horizontal and mutual understanding of imitation. The prefix 'inter' thus becomes increasingly dominant in the definition of imitation (van Ginneken, 1992: 218). In the introductory remarks to *Psychologie économique* from 1902, for example, society is described in a way that differs from the previous somnambulistic and suggestive definitions: 'Society is a web of interspiritual actions' (Tarde, 1902a: 1).

Probably the most important implication of this redefinition of imitation concerns the concept of crowds. When the notion of imitation is

detached from suggestion and made interspiritual, the way is prepared for a conception of the social that is truly disconnected from physical co-presence. Eventually, Tarde did draw implications from this and asserted that what is really distinctive about modernity is not urban crowds, but publics. A public is 'a purely spiritual collectivity, a dispersion of individuals who are physically separated and whose cohesion is entirely mental' (Tarde, 1969: 277, 1989: 31). These publics – themselves children of modern media of communication, in particular the newspaper – form the essential character of modernity, Tarde ultimately claims. Yet, despite his endorsement of the public, he nevertheless maintains his worries about crowd phenomena. Thus, Tarde states, publics often get overexcited and turn into crowds which leads him to define the public as 'a potential crowd' (1969: 282, 1989: 39). In other words, even in an era where publics seem to dominate, Tarde highlights a backdrop of crowds and their spatial materiality. In his later writings, therefore, the primary question for Tarde is no longer, what can we do to prevent the formation of crowds per se, but, more importantly, how can we prevent publics, this alleged bulwark against chaos, from themselves turning into crowds, and how may crowds be transformed into publics? Indeed, Tarde says, 'the relationship of the public with crowds . . . call[s] for original research' (1903: 79). One might argue that Tarde's tribute to the public is just another example of the conservative element in his thought, as publics present a picture of modernity that is not characterized by physical destruction but by communication. Emphasizing and supporting the development of publics may thus form part of a strategic attempt to stabilize society. In line with the previous discussion of crowds, however, I contend that a present discussion of crowd phenomena need not subscribe to Tarde's conservative preference for publics. Hence, the main contribution of his late writings is not, I claim, the idea of an epochal domination of publics (rather than crowds). The real contribution is his identification of the intricate and very delicate relation between publics and crowds. Tarde deserves great credit for pointing out this issue, but never examined it sufficiently himself. It therefore seems an important and promising topic for further investigation.

Of course, the shift in Tarde's conception of imitation also has implications for the arguments on communication and urbanity. Although the communication foundation per se is unaffected by the altered notion of imitation – whether imitation is horizontally or vertically based, whether it radiates from a superior or not, it requires a medium of communication – the whole idea of communication becomes increasingly dominant. In fact, very much like Luhmann, Tarde ends up arguing that in modern society imitation often takes place through communication which is not limited in space. Does this mean that the spatiality of imitation should therefore not be attributed any significance and that, in his later writings, Tarde's reference to urbanism becomes obsolete? Simply answering in the affirmative would be too hasty. First, the agglomeration effects of cities that Tarde identifies are unaffected by imitation being a matter of interspirituality. Thus

cities may still be loci of new inventions and their imitations, and, due to new media of communication, imitations may spread rapidly to the provinces, though not *because* they have an urban origin. Second, as suggested in the discussion of rhythmanalysis, architecture and spatial design may condition imitation processes. This is still the case when imitation is defined interspiritually. In fact, the rhythmanalytical project appears even more in line with this conception of imitation, for the suggestive understanding of imitation presupposes a law-like structure founded more on a priori dynamics than on empirical observations, which rhythmanalysis seeks to replace with a much more diagnostic attitude.

To conclude, the aim of the article has been to re-establish Tarde's sociology in a contemporary theoretical context by accentuating perspectives that have not had a central place in the recent reception of his work. Relating Tarde's work to the systems theory of Luhmann, it was argued that it is wrong to expel Tardean insights by accusing his theory of being simply a psychologism. Rather, the theory of imitation is a pure sociology, which even carries linkages to urban theory. But Tarde is not only worth rehabilitating because his theory is in line with dominant perspectives of the present (Deleuze, Latour, particular branches of urban theory, etc.). Even more interesting are the possibilities of transcending the agendas of today. In this article, two such possibilities have been suggested. The crowd phenomenon has long produced a certain uneasiness in social theory, but would a proper theory of society not have to deal with this discomfort and incorporate the crowd and reflect on the idea that crowds' simultaneous manifestation and destruction of sociality illustrates a paradox of the social? Equally important is the question of how to conceive of the present relation between crowds and publics. The second possibility proposed, rhythmanalysis, is an illustration of how Tardean sociology may be extended with a more structural emphasis than is found in Tarde himself. I do not suggest that Tarde's general theory of society should be reactivated in its entirety. It should nevertheless be promoted as an elaborated and stimulating challenge to mainstream sociological thought.

Notes

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1. Indeed, Tarde is very critical about the idea of the autonomous self, see, for example, the following assessment:

> . . . man is wrong in thinking that he imitates because he wishes to. For this very will to imitate has been handed down through imitation. Before imitating the act of another we begin by feeling the need from which this act proceeds, and we feel it precisely as we do only because it has been suggested to us. (1962: 193)

Hence also his critique of 'the illusion of free will' (1968: 194).

2. Tarde also plays practically no part in Luhmann's work. In the latter's theoretical masterpiece, *Social Systems*, for example, Tarde is mentioned only once, and only in passing (Luhmann, 1995: 346). Of course, this does not preclude the identification of analytical and theoretical similarities; see Balke (1998), who observes Tarde and Luhmann (and Deleuze) in terms of their common emphasis on difference.

3. Circularity is an unavoidable condition for self-referential phenomena. Rather than considering circularity a theoretical impasse, Luhmann argues that we should rediscover the rhetorical tradition of the 16th century and observe circularity and its derived paradoxes in terms of their creative qualities. Thus, even though 'a theory of society ultimately [has] to be founded on an unfolded paradox' (1993: 772), we should turn our attention to how social systems nevertheless unfold such paradoxes in their ongoing operations. We enter the same track if, following Tarde, we observe how imitation spreads, as this would also demonstrate that social life is practically unaffected by the paradoxes and circularities that pose problems for classical logic.

4. Certainly, Jürgen Habermas is vaguely concerned with space and urbanity in his study of the structural transformation of the public sphere, but in his later work on communicative action, the interest in space disappears. A greater attention to space is found in Michel Foucault, where discourses are occasionally analysed in relation to architecture and spatial design, but even Foucault 'was neither systemic nor persistent' in this interest (Isin, 1998: 33).

5. Hughes shrewdly observes that even Tarde's criminological masterpiece, *Penal Philosophy*, is 'really a treatise on change from a society dominated by tradition to one in which fashions and other kinds of influence flow out from cities' (1961: 559, note 14).

6. Even if several affinities can be identified between the rhythmologies of Tarde and Lefebvre, the latter does not refer to Tarde. Instead, Lefebvre (2004: 9) cites Bachelard, whose *Dialectic of Duration* closes with a chapter on rhythmanalysis, which for its part draws upon an untraceable treatise by the Portuguese philosopher Pinheiro dos Santos (Bachelard, 2000: 136ff.). I should add that in the present discussion of Tarde and Lefebvre, I leave out a number of recent engagements with the question of rhythms which do not directly address the issues with which I am concerned, for example, Adam's (1995) work on rhythmicity.

7. As Martin explains, this also applies to society: 'Society is an immense brain, itself made up of individual brains – called *monads* by Tarde – that connect according to certain rhythms . . .' (1999: 33).

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