

The Anthem Companion to Gabriel Tarde (Anthem Companions to Sociology)

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The Anthem Companion to Gabriel Tarde

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À la mémoire de Raymond Boudon (1934–2013)

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At the close of the nineteenth century, Gabriel Tarde held an enviable position within the nascent but still restricted community of sociologists (Valade 1989). Tarde's works were widely read, and they sparked much discussion among those who, like Alfred Espinas and René Worms, were striving to make sociology a true scientific discipline. Auguste Comte of course, had signed the birth certificate of this discipline half a century earlier but Tarde, in contrast to his great rival Émile Durkheim, was not at all inspired by the founder of positivism, unless it was to contradict him. Instead it was Antoine Augustin Cournot, at least in his philosophical writings, who served Tarde as a kind of intellectual guide (Martin 2002). Hence the originality of Tarde's sociology, the intention of which, as revealed in much of his works, was to link the homogenous and the heterogeneous—like and unlike—in a strict relationship of reciprocity that evokes some aspects of Hegelian dialectic. What struck him in particular, in the panorama of history, was the picture of the man who makes and unmakes himself in contact with others, and the picture of a society that is constantly being reshaped by the invention, imitation and subjectivity of social players.

Such a stance, which ran counter to the positivism of his time, was of course unlikely to attract many readers to the author of *Les Lois de l'imitation*, but it may help explain his intellectual legacy, which was tortuous to say the least. In 1970 the philosopher Jean Milet, in the most important book yet devoted to the thought of Tarde, had this to say about his legacy: "History commits some strange injustices. It has been particularly harsh on Tarde. This man was hailed by his contemporaries as one of the great thinkers of his time [...]. Yet a few years after his death that same man fell into an inexplicable oblivion. A shroud of silence settled over his work. For the last 50 years, mention of the very existence of this great sociologist and philosopher was to be found in only a few studies and articles, often moreover of foreign origin" (1970, 13). Even Raymond Aron, who wrote a great deal on the history of sociology, did not see fit to include Tarde in his gallery of intellectual portraits.

How, in hindsight, are we to interpret this eclipse? We must surely start by looking at the architecture of his work, which is written in a heavy, needlessly complicated style, often distracted by curious digressions and a somewhat questionable use of metaphors borrowed from the world of nature. We must also say that the recurrent comparisons that are drawn between Tarde and Durkheim (who was much more precise in articulating his ideas) have not always been to the former's advantage. Some social science historians have also put forward the notion that Durkheim's ideas were more in keeping with the social and political context of the time (marked in particular by the emergence of trade unions and the growing influence of the socialists) than were those of Tarde, who was "more attuned to the high-bourgeois internationalist viewpoint of the salons that Tarde took pains to frequent when he settled in Paris in 1904" (Lubek 1981, 377). Opposed to socialism and partial to elitism, Tarde was something of an anachronism in his own time (Lukes 1973, 202). It was not until the 1960s that his sociological work was seriously revisited (Clark 1969; Boudon 1971).

This book seeks to identify the principal threads of a complex course of thought, resolutely tortuous, which has contributed greatly to the development of sociology, in France and elsewhere. Although he founded no "school," and never had any real disciples, Tarde certainly propagated some new ideas in his own time. For example, his social psychology, which he developed with a perspective far removed from that of Gustave Le Bon, was one of the most important influences on the symbolic interactionism of the Chicago school. And in his analyses—which have spawned scarcely any posterity—he also had the virtue of seeing that the overly narrow utilitarianism of some economists was incomplete and betrayed major theoretical gaps. It is true in any case that Tarde was not the author of just one book. We would be at risk of misunderstanding Tarde, whom

Dauriac in fact considered “one of the most original philosophers of the 19th century” (1906, 149) if, as is often the case, we confined ourselves to his famous *Lois de l'imitation*.

There can be no doubt, in any case, that over the last 15 years the work of Gabriel Tarde has for various reasons undergone new assessments. The authors of this rediscovery approach it from different horizons. The present volume of essays, as will be seen, includes contributors from no fewer than four generations of “social scientists” whose thinking is rooted in many different intellectual traditions.

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[Chapter 1](#)

[FORGOTTEN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIES: GABRIEL TARDE'S FORMULATIONS](#)

Ian Lubek

In examining the “lost social psychologies” of Gabriel Tarde, a research format and set of guiding hypotheses are offered to historians, sociologists and social psychologists of science (Lubek [1993a](#)) interested in studying Tarde, other “lost” social psychologists, or more generally, any branch of a discipline that has “disappeared” from historical accounts (Lubek [1983a](#); Lubek and Apfelbaum [1979](#), [1987](#)). After a brief overview of Tarde’s life work and style of intellectual system-building, four specific attempts to create a Tardean social psychology are examined, including his final formulation of an *interpsychology*. But his ideas had little impact in France and North America (Lubek [1990](#)). Five hypotheses are offered to guide research about the historical and institutional factors at work: (1) the debate with Durkheim represented a clash of “paradigm/exemplars”; (2) there was a lack of a Tardean paradigm/community to promote and institutionalize his ideas; (3) Tarde’s perspective may not have been compatible with the sociopolitical ethos; (4) linguistic and cultural barriers may have prevented transatlantic migration of the ideas; and (5) interactionist theories had an epistemologically vague status within the positivistic social sciences.

The search for “lost” systematic social-psychological analyses may help correct some of what Samelson ([1974](#)) called “origin myths” in the history of a discipline. In examining more closely a “forgotten” research enterprise in terms of its own sociocultural–historical context, one may get a better understanding of certain key turning points in the development of a scientific discipline. In

other studies, explanations have been sought about why certain minority (or dissident) ideas, theories or paradigm/exemplars (Lubek and Apfelbaum [1979](#), [1987](#); Lubek [1980](#)) have become lost or defeated in debate, often against a stronger “paradigm/community” that support what eventually will become the mainstream formulations or paradigm/exemplar. One purpose of this chapter is to highlight the use of primary archival sources in historiography. At the time of the original work in the 1970s, there was a renaissance in scholarship in France about the history of sociology and the social sciences, and archival research began in earnest. A “Durkheimian study group” was formed in Paris, issued a newsletter, and also organized special issues of the *Revue française de sociologie*, with Philippe Besnard ([1976](#), [1979a](#), [1981](#)) editing three, starting in 1976 with *À propos de Durkheim*, followed in 1979 by “*Les durkheimiens*” and, in 1981, “*Sociologies françaises au tournant du siècle. Les concurrents du groupe durkheimien*,” in which a precursor version of this chapter appeared (Lubek 1981). This group found various Parisian sociological archives to work with, but to my knowledge, only Milet ([1970](#)) had previously consulted the Tarde archives in the Dordogne region of France to write about Tarde for his thesis. This “antique” article is presented here to show the great value of texts such as diaries, letters, lecture notes, book contracts in understanding what goes on “behind the scenes” in academia or “behind the pages” in publications. Since the article appeared in French, much additional research about Tarde has appeared (e.g., Barry and Thrift [2007](#); Blackman [2007](#); Candea [2010](#); King [2016](#); Leroux [2011](#); Salmon [2005](#)).

But back in the nineteenth century, there was a wide variety of articles and books, conference papers, symposia and courses in universities and colleges, each touching on some aspect of the evolving “social psychology, and if we confine ourselves to contributions in the French language, we can scan the literature starting with P. Chasles’s ([1875](#)) posthumous book *La psychologie sociale des nouveaux peuples* until the outbreak of World War I. The specific social-psychological contributions of Duprat, Hamon, Palante, Toulouse and Chasles have already been briefly described (Lubek [1980](#)) and attention paid to Augustin Hamon (Apfelbaum and Lubek [1982](#); [1983](#); Lubek and Apfelbaum [1989](#)). But, as well, works on social-psychological themes were offered to turn-of-the-century French readers by Bunge, Draghiesco, de Roberty, Mazel, Maxwell, Marion, Campeano, Létourneau, Bourgeois, de la Grasserie, Le Bon, Bouglé, Fouillée, Parodi, Lapie, De Greef, Solvay and others (Lubek [1980](#); Gundlach [1977](#)).

During the Third Republic, a number of currents of ideas, institutions, social movements and evolving academic disciplines confronted the interaction between the individual and society (Apfelbaum [1986](#)). This was often discussed in both scholarly and popular media under such rubrics as social sciences, socialism, solidarism, mutualism, social hygiene, syndicalism, social work, social questions, folk psychology, collective psychology and crowd psychology. Eventually (by the 1890s), some authors, including Tarde, would begin to use the term “social psychology.” Many of the earlier “proto-social psychologies” (Apfelbaum [1986](#)) have been forgotten, both in France and in North America, and not mentioned in historical accounts. As well, some of the origins of evolving systems of “social psychology,” such as Tarde’s, were not documented by disciplinary historians.

It may be useful for a fuller understanding of a discipline’s present state, the longevity of its scientific research, and training programmes for its new researchers to examine how and why these “lost” or forgotten social psychologies, or contributing branches, have disappeared. This chapter focuses on just one under-cited and “lost” French contributor to social psychology, Gabriel Tarde, who may have been the most persistent social thinker of the period attempting to formulate a systematic social psychology. Tarde’s ([1890](#)) early work on imitation was cited and remembered in the 1940s–1960s in the North American literature of child/ developmental psychology, and his works on criminology were also cited in France. But his various attempts to create a systematic “social psychology” are largely unknown on both sides of the Atlantic. We will only briefly examine Tarde’s overall writings (œuvres), but rather focus more specifically on the social-psychological

ideas. A final section will offer some hypotheses about the lack of acceptance of Tarde's social-psychological ideas within the developing discipline of social psychology.

The Evolution of Tarde's œuvre: Problems of Slow Gestation, Dissemination, Expansion and Repetition

Tarde reports seeking a social explanation of the individual's economic, collective and interpersonal behavior: "j'ai essayé de dégager [...] le côté purement social des faits humains" (Tarde 1890, i). A rich set of biographical materials about Tarde is already available; this chapter focuses more narrowly on his social-psychological ideas. See further: Bouglé (1905a), Clark (1968a; 1969), Discours (1909), Guy-Grand (1934), Lacassagne (1904), Matagrín (1910), Mazel (1904), Milet (1970), Tarde (1909a) and the unpublished diaries of Tarde (1862–1900). From this material one receives the impression that Tarde emerged as a creative thinker who developed many of his ideas while isolated from other social thinkers. His eclectic interests led him to extensive self-directed readings, especially after he returned in 1866 to his native Sarlat (and the nearby home at La Roque Gageac) to begin a legal career. Generally, his ideas took some time to germinate, from the moment he first noted them to their more polished appearance in print. Although initially rather shy about publishing his ideas, he tried them out as short articles before reworking them into longer, more systematic studies. As his early ideas matured, he constantly revised them and then expanded them into new areas. As he explained to a young social psychologist, G. L. Duprat, in a letter: "De fait, mes idées principales se sont formées bien longtemps avant leur publication. Un de mes anciens collègues de Ruffec se souvient très bien que je lui ai souvent exposé, dès 1874 ou 1875, ce qu'il a lu depuis plus développé dans mes ouvrages [...] Entre vingt-cinq et trente ans, mon système d'idées a pris corps" (Tarde 1904a, 333).

The systematic reworking and updating of ideas sometimes brought about criticisms of Tarde's later works: some of the material, developed at an earlier stage, might not be fully integrated with the later-developed ideas. For example, in 1881 he published his first article on *La psychologie en économie politique*; these ideas would later be repeated in *La logique sociale* (Tarde 1895a) and *Psychologie économique* (Tarde 1902). Similarly, in the early 1880s a series of articles began appearing in *Revue philosophique* that formed the basic ideas of *Lois de l'imitation* (Tarde 1890). Another element that would affect the speed and direction of development of Tarde's œuvre was editorial decision making.

Below are several examples of these processes at work in the shaping of the Tardean system or paradigm/exemplar (Lubek and Apfelbaum 1979; Lubek 1980). These may provide useful clues when considering the specific problems Tarde would face in gaining acceptance for his social-psychological ideas. Milet (1970) discusses two early unpublished studies by Tarde on *La différence universelle* (Tarde 1870) and *Les possibles* (Tarde 1874). Both informed his later work and portions of the latter finally were published in Tarde (1895a; 1895b). In 1874, he readied a book for publication entitled *La répétition et l'évolution des phénomènes: Essai critique et théorique*, but after failing to agree to the conditions of the editor (Germer Ballière, the predecessor of Félix Alcan), he withdrew the text. Essertier suggests: "Un de ses manuscrits, qui date de 1874, fait déjà de l'imitation, c'est-à-dire de l'interaction des consciences, la loi du monde moral et social" (1930, 201). The slow gestation of Tarde's ideas can also be seen by comparing the different manuscript versions of what started, in February 1884 as a sociological novel, *Roman sociologique: Une page d'histoire future*, which was Tarde's troglodytic utopia set in the twenty-second century. After several revisions, the setting was moved to the twenty-fifth century, and the manuscript was sent to sociologist/editor René Worms, who changed its title to *Fragment d'histoire future* (Tarde 1896; reprinted in 1904 and 1905, and translated into English in 1905, with a preface by H. G. Wells).

Les Lois sociales (Tarde 1898b) also shows a revision and summary of three major systematic works (Tarde 1890, 1895a; 1897). During the last one-third of his life, Tarde became increasingly prolific

and produced 15 books plus numerous articles in the areas of criminology, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, geography, archeology, history, economics, futurology, penology, social psychology and, time permitting, literary divertissements and poetry. In much of this work, key concepts and themes are reworked, updated, then applied to new areas, such as politics, law, power and economics, and then further expanded. As discussed below, some critics chose to focus on that which was repeated, rather than evaluating the new systematic extensions that had been made.

Given the narrow focus of this chapter on social psychology, we do not cover the different branches of Tarde's eclectic writing, as described by philosopher Henri Bergson, as a

point de vue très original sur la causalité [...], celle qui opère dans les sociétés humaines, où un individu invente et où d'autres individus l'imitent. L'imitation [...] c'est une certaine action sui generis qui s'exerce d'esprit. C'est une certaine contagion psychologique se propageant dans une certaine direction déterminée. C'est, entre les consciences, un va-et-vient qui tend à produire un nivellement et qui les amènerait toutes sur le même plan si, à chaque instant, de nouvelles inventions ne créaient de nouvelles différences de niveau. Psychologique et social tout à la fois par ses origines, ce principe a conduit Tarde à constituer une science des sociétés qui repose sur l'étude de l'âme humaine et une science de l'âme humaine qui tient l'individu pour prédestiné à la vie sociale. Il a donné une sociologie nettement psychologique, et une psychologie toute prête à s'épanouir en sociologie. Entre la science de l'homme individuel et celle de l'homme social Tarde opéra une synthèse sur laquelle il fit converger toutes les autres sciences particulières. La répétition avec l'opposition et l'adaptation qui en sont complémentaires, fut pour lui un principe d'explication véritablement universel. (Bergson [1909](#), 6)

Four Attempts to Create a Systematic Tardean Social Psychology

Tarde himself thought that the roots of social psychology were traceable to the observations and analyses of Mme de Sévigné's 17th-century salon society (Tarde, [1901](#), 139–140). The origins of his own attempts to systematize social psychology are traceable to the early 1880s. After outlining his various attempts, we may speculate about why these social-psychological ideas became “lost” in France and America.

How Tarde's two-volume “Social Psychology” (Tarde [1887](#)) lost its title

Examination of Tarde's personal papers shows that from about 1884 onward, there were plans for a two-part work entitled *Psychologie sociale* and *La logique sociale*. Tarde worked from March 15 to April 19, 1884, then added revisions in February 1885 to a chapter entitled *Logique individuelle et logique sociale*. He noted on the folder containing this chapter: “Attach this as a final chapter to a book titled *Psychologie sociale et logique sociale* or else *Logique sociale et psychologie sociale*.” During 1886–1887, his “plan” listed a variety of alternative titles and variations including: *La psychologie sociale*; *La psychologie sociale, théorie sociologique*; *La psychologie sociale et la logique historique*; *La psychologie des sociétés et la logique de l'histoire*; *L'imitation et la science sociale*. In June 1886 he envisioned two distinct parts, the first on “Imitation and its laws” and the second on “Invention and its laws” (including social logic and social teleology). By 1887, a file folder contained a two-part work to be called *La psychologie sociale: essai sur la science des sociétés*, with an alternative title listed as *Les lois de l'imitation: principes de la science sociale*. As such, the material for the two volumes was sent off to the publisher, Félix Alcan.

In his foreword for the book titled “Psychologie sociale” (unpublished document, dated May 1887), Tarde indicates that he has chosen the title “Social Psychology” because sociology was too entrenched in the public mind (after Comte and Spencer) “with physical or biological interpretations of social facts.” Tarde dissociates himself from the organicist view of sociology. “In

other terms, if I don't view sociology as a 'higher' form of biology, even more tangled and obscure than the original, I do regard it as an enlarged psychology, enlightened by its own extensions." With all the recent revolutionary advances in psychology, social science, according to Tarde, could not remain indifferent to that discipline. For even if psychology called itself physiological, it "is eminently sociological by its implications and its consequences," as a look at Bernheim's work on "universal suggestion" would show. In outlining "a pure sociology untrammelled by any anatomical or physiological elements," Tarde notes that this youngest science can come of its own, leaving anthropology to worry about the whole man and his physical and social sides. Tarde defines his task as a sociologist "to consider man exclusively as a member of society, as a transitory depository of a social form, a certain type of civilization which preceded him and will survive beyond him." Finally, he argues that "the social is therefore quite distinct from the vital, although the social may be formed as a consequence of the vital, by an accumulation of individual contributions over the centuries. But one must specify the nature of these 'deposits' and unravel the distinctive, permanent, and necessary features of the resulting social phenomenon [...] the capital of individuals consists exclusively of beliefs and wishes, susceptible to spread by imitation (i.e., for discoveries and inventions, for initiating ideas and plans), and such propagation of given examples is the characteristic achievement of societies" (Tarde [1887](#), unpublished manuscript).

A series of letters was exchanged between Alcan, Tarde and the psychology advisor to Alcan, Th. Ribot, during August and September 1887. Alcan (letter to Tarde, August 12, 1887) was reticent to publish such a large work, which would entail 2 volumes of 350–400 pages each, and which would have to be marketed at the prohibitive price of 15 francs. As well, Alcan was unable to put up the 4,500–5,000 franc costs of production, but nonetheless offered to distribute the book for Tarde, if the latter paid the printer. A week later, Alcan (letter to Tarde, August 19, 1887) agreed to publish the two works separately. *Les Lois de l'imitation*, the first volume, appeared in 1890 priced at 6 francs (and a second edition at 7 francs 50 followed in 1895), but minus Tarde's foreword about social psychology and any indication that this was part of a two-volume work on social psychology. The appearance of the second book, *La logique sociale*, followed only five years later, in 1895. Although a number of authors place the publication date as 1893 (e.g., Tarde [1909](#); Benrubi [1933](#); Milet [1970](#)) or else 1894 (e.g., Clark [1969](#); Guy-Grand [1934](#)), the earliest copy I have come across of the first edition is dated 1895.

Les lois de l'imitation became Tarde's psychological hallmark, first in France then in America. The English translation by E. C. Parsons, appeared as *The Laws of Imitation*, but not until 1903. However, *La logique sociale* was less widely distributed in France and was never translated into English. A rough comparison of impact can be attempted if one assumes that the degree of dissemination of ideas correlates with the numbers of books sold. (We know from such sources as the *National Union Catalogue*, or Lorenz's *Catalogue* approximately how many editions each work went through. (Lubek 1981, Table 1, 367) The general pattern that emerges from examining the account statements sent by Alcan to Tarde (1897–1901) is that there was probably an initial press run of 1,000 copies and most later editions had 500 copies printed. After scrutiny of the accounts, I estimate that prior to 1921, *Les lois de l'imitation* sold about 4,600 copies in France, while *La logique sociale* saw about 2,500 copies printed. The English translation, *The Laws of Imitation*, was estimated to have sold between 1,500 to 2,500 between 1903 and 1962. The dissemination of Tarde's works may be compared with sales in America of other "social psychology" works, often used as college textbooks. Murphy ([1949](#), 405) reports sales for William McDougall's (1908) *Social Psychology* text at over 100,000, while Edward A. Ross's *Social Control* ([1901](#)) sold about 18,000 copies by 1933 and his *Social Psychology* 43,000 (Weinberg, Hinkle and Hinkle, 1969). There may also be a relation between books read during undergraduate and graduate training and the longevity of certain ideas within a paradigm/community (Lubek [1980](#); 1993). Comparisons of the "classic texts" of the social sciences with university course syllabi and later citations in the literature may shed some light on the relation between book sales and later impact of a system of ideas (Garfield [1978](#)). *

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