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Sociological metaphysics and pragmatist sociology: the pragmatic and metaphysical utility of statistics in Gabriel Tarde

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Resumo: O presente artigo visa considerar a sociologia de Gabriel Tarde, traçando um elo entre a sua metafísica sociológica, a sociologia dos humanos propriamente dita e a aplicação prática e metafísica da estatística. Observamos como as esferas metafísica e sociológica, incluindo a Monadologia predicada na concepção de uma possessão mútua e repetitiva, e seu foco no caráter probabilístico da realidade, constitui a base para elaborar sua sociologia antropológica onde humanos se possuem imitativamente por formar posturas pragmáticas compartilhadas. Em seguida, essa condição repetitiva nos conduz a um entendimento da mobilização da estatística feita por Tarde, tanto no campo empírico quanto no metafísico. Posto isso, a estatística se torna um ponto de partida para facultar o entendimento da relação entre as dimensões metafísica e pragmática no pensamento de Tarde.

Palavras-chave: Gabriel Tarde; Pragmatismo; Estatística; Metafísica.

Abstract: This article seeks to consider Gabriel Tarde's sociology, highlighting a connection between his sociological metaphysics, the anthropological sociology itself and his practical and metaphysical applications of statistics. We observe how the overlapping metaphysical and sociological fields, including the Monadology predicated on the idea of mutual, repetitive possession and its focus on the probabilistic character of reality, forms the background for the elaboration of his anthropological sociology where humans possess one another imitatively by constituting shared pragmatic postures. In turn, this repetitive condition leads us to a way of deploying statistics, both in the empirical and metaphysical spheres. As such, statistics becomes an entry point for understanding the relationship between the metaphysical and pragmatic dimensions of Tarde's thought.

Keywords: Gabriel Tarde; Pragmatism; Statistics; Metaphysics.

Introduction

Prior to his becoming the renowned sociologist and public intellectual on the Parisian social scene, Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904) was active initially as a provincial judge and criminologist, and subsequently as director of the Bureau of Crime Statistics at the French Ministry of Justice. As such, during a significant part of his professional life, he dealt with practical, "vocational" issues related to measurement, more specifically in the form of statistics. His "applied" involvement with statistics and the law, as well as his criminology research, shaped the way he formulated his sociology of a distinctly pragmatist flavor and informed his manner of conceiving of pragmatic agents. Furthermore, in a very clear sense, his metaphysical claims reflect a certain statistical view of reality, such that his understanding of sociology as a discipline descriptive of pragmatic actors, and more broadly as a viable metaphysical framework, was strongly intertwined with his conceptions as a statistician. This in turn informed a graphical dimension of his work related to the role of tendential, statistical curves as a diagrammatic tool that sought to "visualize" sociological objects as an element of a broader tendency of reality to construct itself according to statistically reproducible "flows" and tendencies of transmissive reproduction. As such, this article will seek to demonstrate how statistics, pragmatism, and metaphysics constitute, in Tarde's thought, a mutually imbricated set of conditions that have to be understood in conjunction, with statistics operating as a lynchpin that mediates both pragmatic and metaphysical operations.

sociological metaphysics

To begin our investigation, it will be worthwhile schematically outlining some general aspects of Tarde's metaphysical framework. As such, in the first part, we start by highlighting certain metaphysical conceptions that underpin his sociology. In the second part, we will move onto the more restricted focus which pertains in his specifically human sociology, showing how this ties into certain pragmatic concerns, and in the third part, we consider how statistics intersects these two fields as a means of "materializing" the coherence of his thought more broadly speaking. In more general metaphysical terms then, Tarde notably views his perspective *as being sociological*, what he will call in *Monadology and Sociology* (1893) "the universal sociological point of view" (Tarde, 2012, p. 34), such that "all sciences seem destined to become branches of sociology"¹ (Tarde, 2012, p. 28). As such, in Tarde's thought, there is a certain reflexivity or reciprocity between metaphysics and sociology. According to such an outlook, whatever the scientific, empirical specialization under consideration, we can presume that in some way or other, we encounter groups of social entities behaving socially, and being defined as what they are, according to their specific manner of social co-existence. This leads Tarde to argue that "at root, the whole content of the concept of being is exhausted by the concept of having" (Tarde, 2012, p. 52). All entities therefore are "proprietors" with "property" (Tarde, 2012, p. 53), whereby the "property" they are "proprietors" of is *other such proprietors* of a particular modality. As regards such "social" actors, a *reflexive* relationship is understood as pertaining between them; or, in dealing with social entities, we always assume that a given social entity possesses other such social entities *like* itself, and that they *are* what they are due to this specific manner of mutual *possession* or co-belonging. This consolidates the elevation of *having over being* as the primordial ontological condition.

Secondly, and in a related sense, within Tarde's conception "science tends to pulverize the universe" (Tarde, 2012, p. 15), that is, it deals always with multiples of a given magnitude of entity, located "below" - as the product of this "pulverization" - another given magnitude of entity in scalar space, *understanding an explanatory movement as pertaining between the two*. Furthermore, as an extension of this condition, Tarde speaks of an "explanation of the finite by the infinitesimal" (Tarde, 2012, p. 10) whereby "everything comes from the infinitesimal and everything returns to it" (Tarde, 2012, p. 11). Here, scientific inquiry relies on identifying a multiplicity of elements as belonging to a given category via a certain modality of possession, a specific type of possessive *act*. That is, Tarde's monadology depends on "classifying the different types and degrees of possession" (Tarde, 2012, p. 54), understanding that multiple acts of possession imply repetition of some sort. The diversity of scientific fields, to which sociology as the sociology of humans would belong, as one more science, *while simultaneously standing in as a metaphysical model for science in general*² - according to the "universal sociological point of view" - recapitulates the diverse modes of possession that arise and define this or that type of sociability. This is what grants sociology a properly *metaphysical* import for Tarde insofar as it gains a general explanatory power that traverses the diversity of scientific fields and types of

1: Situating Tarde more generally in the context of canonical sociology, he performs an equivalent but inverse movement to that realized by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), for example. It is equivalent in that both sociologists understand sociology as attaining a paradigmatic metaphysical significance in the constitution of scientific knowledge. However, inverse - and herein lies the profound distinction between Tarde and Durkheim - insofar as Tarde does this by generalizing sociological conditions beyond the human, attributing sociological characteristics to reality at large, and in so doing, giving sociology license to play this paradigmatic explanatory role, with human society being only a more specialized stream of a broader cosmological dynamic. The neo-Kantian Durkheim, by contrast, so positions sociology by making human society and, by extension, sociology as the science of this entity, a proxy for Kant's transcendental ego as a properly epistemic subject that precipitates the production of scientific knowledge.

2: It is important to note, therefore, that the notion "sociology" reflects a certain polyvalence in Tarde's thought, insofar as, while he undoubtedly gives it a broader metaphysical significance which extends beyond the limited anthropological sphere - a move clearly evident in *Monadology and Sociology* (1893) - concomitantly, he intends for texts such as *The Laws of Imitation* (1890) to be sociology *stricto sensu*, as the proposal of a properly anthropological conception of human society. The framework outlined in *Monadology and Sociology* with its broader metaphysical resonance, is equally operative in the anthropological sociology of *The Laws of Imitation*, such that Tarde formulates a sociological metaphysics which also animates his anthropological sociology, with the result that the two overlap and inform one another without one nullifying the other.

entities inhabiting these fields. We might therefore disagree with Lazzarato's claim that "to the contrary of the sociologists, Tarde does not pose the question: how is society possible?" (Lazzarato, 2018, p. 8). We do so, given that, if the science of monads (monadology) is coherent as a methodological proposal, it is insofar as it seeks to identify the characteristic act of assimilation constitutive of a given type of society. As monadologist and sociologist, Tarde indeed poses the question: "how is such and such a type of society possible?" And the response, according to the general precepts of monadology, will be according to some particular modality of act of possession, which makes a specific form of society viable.

As a corollary to this parsing of the diversity of scientific fields, another aspect to consider is that of the multiplicity of scales of magnitude. In this regard, although a common reading of Tarde (Candea, 2010; Tamboukou, 2015; Telivuo, 2015; Tonkonoff, 2017; 2013), following Deleuze's and Guattari's lead, is as a founder of a "microsociology" (2005), we would argue that this conception arises from a certain misplacement of the function of the infinitesimal in the overall operation of his sociology. As such, we will assume that *multi-scalar sociology* is a more apt description for Tarde's sociological outlook, wherein the infinitesimal operates as an explanatory tendency or lure towards a *progressively complete but never necessarily finalized description*; ³ or, as an analytical *tendency* guiding the descriptive movement so as to attain ever-greater richness and precision of sociological detail.⁴ From this perspective, for example, we can argue that micro and macro-relations are equally evident between neurons and neural networks, between neural networks and brains, between individuals and institutions, dwellings and cities, as well as between brains, individuals, institutions and cities, understanding that the macro of one context can become the micro of another. Auxier and Herstein (2017) make a valuable observation in relation to Whitehead, which is equally relevant to Tarde, describing how *micro* and *macro* are designations that gain sense through processes of concrescence such that the anterior phase is termed micro while the final state of achieved concrescence is designated macro. Here, scale becomes an index of the relative functioning of associations between actual entities as they relate to one another *across* their particular positions in scalar space and throughout processes of concrescence.⁵ And, while we could argue that the micro scale obtains explanatory primacy, as Tarde himself asserts, such that microsociology could appear an apt description, we also wish to emphasize the importance of the explanatory *movement* itself, which is performed functionally through relating scales to one another. As such, the explanatory movement and the multiplicity of relevant scales become an irreducible aspect of the description.

As such, it is not that *everything would be immediately reducible* to the infinitesimally small for Tarde; there are finite scalar entities composing the universe and *we always begin our descriptive work from some point or other in scalar space*, but any particular finite scale implies

3: Indeed, Tarde argues that "there is no way to call a halt to this descent to the infinitesimal, which, most unexpectedly, becomes the key to the entire universe" (Tarde, 2012, p. 9). In this sense, he will observe that "parasites too, have their parasites. And so on" (Tarde, 2012, p.7, emphasis ours), understanding "so on" graphically or diagrammatically as a descending arrow. As such, in part, the function of the infinitesimal within the description is to lead it "downwards" towards the infinitesimal, through the aggregation of finite scales. And, while Tarde takes care to note that the infinitesimal "is qualitatively distinct from the finite" (Tarde, 2012, p. 11), we do not, however, either eliminate the finite nor presuppose its homogeneity in scalar terms – there are parasites of parasites of parasites – at heterogeneous finite magnitudes existing through relations with one another.

4: Tarde makes this clearer when he argues that "since everything in the world of facts proceeds from small to great, everything in the world of ideas, which reflects it as though reversed in the mirror, naturally proceeds from great to small and in the course of its analysis comes upon the elementary facts and real explanations only at the end of its journey" (Tarde, 2000, p. 55, emphasis ours). We are clearly distinguishing between a certain logical priority within the description and an ontological priority in terms of the genesis of finite entities, with the two constituting contrary movements which should not be confused so as to obtain a clear picture of the method.

5: Tarde will apply this relativity both to spatial and temporal conditions, arguing that "I say distant from us, not only by the incommensurable distance between their smallness and our relative immensity, and, conversely, between their relative apparent eternity and our brief duration (a very strange and perhaps imaginary contrast), but also by the profound heterogeneity of their inner nature and ours" (Tarde, 2012, p. 49-50, emphasis ours). This apparent fixity or eternity of some conditions – which indeed, does not impose itself as a necessary conclusion – as opposed to the relative transitory nature of other elements, will become increasingly important when we turn to considering the question of laws and law in general together with evolution.

diverse additional, heterogeneous scales, which leads to the progressive rounding out of our description. In this context, Tarde argues that:

however far we penetrate into the microscopic and even ultra-microscopic depths of the infinitely small, *we will always discover living seeds and complete organisms*, in which observation or induction will lead us to recognize the characteristics of animality as much as vegetation, since the two kingdoms are indistinguishable *in minimis*. (Tarde, 2012, p. 23, emphasis ours).

The prefixes macro- and micro- *gain* meaning *relationally* and *progressively* in terms of concrete, finite scales and actual entities as a function of processes of concrescence that allow the persistence of any given finite entity, without requiring a fixed, *metrical* definition. We should note that “monadologically”, *magnitude* is an index of the particular type of possessive act that pertains at a given scale. The “complete organisms”, the “living seeds”, are such finite scalar entities, indeed, to produce a description at all, it is necessary to suppose such entities, what Auxier and Herstein will refer to as the “quanta of explanation” of actual entities. Therefore, actual entities play a descriptive, explanatory role by serving as finite “foot holds” amidst the infinite regress of a description tending towards the infinitesimally small. While it is true that “nothing can halt this descent to the infinitesimal”, it is strewn with heterogenous, finite beings, hand holds to grab onto as we go down. In this cascade of nested scales, it is relatively unhelpful to speak of *the* micro just as it would be to say that the “macro” was at all dispensable, so as to be able to properly speak of a microsociology per se. We deal more precisely with relative micro and macro scalar relations that gain sense within their mutual connections. As such, we broadly agree with Sampson’s reading when he argues that “Tarde’s social is not concerned with [either] the individual person or its collective representation but rather *with the networks or relational flows that spread out and connect everything to everything else*” (Sampson, 2012, p. 7). If Sampson refers to the relations that extend horizontally across the same scale, Tarde’s sociological metaphysics equally implies flows that connect categories of entity between scales, projecting functional relations that nest scales within one another and produce relative micro and macro determinations.

As an extension of this condition, another associated dynamic in this metaphysics is the habit of monads to meet and form groups at some scale or other, which assumes a condition vital to Tarde’s sociology: the notion of *tendency* or *appetition*. In his monadology, Tarde presumes a “tendency of monads to assemble” (Tarde, 2012, p. 34) as one of the defining conditions active within the monadological field, one notably connected to the formation of habits as we will see in the next section. He also argues that “to *associate* always and everywhere means to *assimilate*, that is, to *imitate*” (Tarde, 2012, p. 48). Given this, groups imitate new habits that have arisen or been *invented*, such that the magnitude of the group is coterminous with the spread of a given reproductive movement. In *The Laws of Imitation*, Tarde argues that “society may therefore be defined as a group of beings who are apt to imitate one another”⁶ (Tarde, 2013, p. 100). At another moment in the same text, he will once again speak of a “sheepish tendency to imitate” (Tarde, 2013, p. 138). Indeed, regarding human subjects specifically, Tarde notes that “we ourselves are infinitely more imitative than inventive” (Tarde, 2013, p. 145). In these cases, we note the *tendency* or *aptitude* of our monadological actors, be they human or otherwise, to group together and “mirror” one another, that is, to reproduce or “conserve” some form of similarity by taking on habitual forms of behaviour. As such, while *they might eventually be*

6: Côrrea’s description appears particularly apt in this context when he argues that “for the sociologies of pragmatist sensibility, therefore, the social world is understood in more or less cohesive, always linguistically mediated, fields of interaction, that invite people to go in certain directions and suggest, with varying degrees of urgency, more or less appropriate lines of action” (Côrrea, 2017, p. 230, emphasis ours). Here, we will see that ideas of “suggestion” or “invitation” in line with this tendential dimension, are vital in Tarde’s sociology insofar as he supposes a fundamental role for an unconscious drive towards imitation in social formation.

inventive, they tend to imitate. In other words, there are probabilities involved, these social actors *tend to assimilate with one another, or tend to reproduce certain habits*, less probably they invent new ones. This *tendency* towards reproduction reflects an even broader biological “tendency” of “individuals of a species to increase in geometrical progression”, as one of the “true laws of human radiation through reproduction” (Tarde, 2013, p. 17). Imitation within human societies, therefore, functions as a more specialized form of a general repetitive *tendency* present throughout the cosmos, within social, biological and physical spheres more broadly.

It is worth pausing to consider the relationship between difference and similarity, as they function in Tarde’s thought, given the importance of difference⁷ in Tarde’s framework, and the fact that until now we have been speaking solely of reproductive, repetitive processes. The oft-quoted statements “difference is the alpha and omega of the universe [...] everything begins with difference [...] everything ends with difference” (Tarde, 2012, p. 40) and “to exist is to differ; difference is in a sense, the truly substantial side of things” (ibid.) must be read together with the proposition “to *associate* means always and everywhere to assimilate, that is to imitate”. Given that Tarde understands all entities as in some sense social, (all sciences tend towards becoming branches of sociology), these apparently opposing tendencies or operations, one assuming the primacy of differentiation and difference, and the other the generality of reproduction, must be taken as overlapping and mutually constitutive functions of Tarde’s schema. If existence arises out of difference, the plurality of different entities equally emerges via the ongoing, continuous character of reproduction and the “inventions” - the differentiations - that take place therein. As such, beyond the primordial role of difference and its associated action of invention, Tarde’s *sociological* outlook also requires a certain *logic of continuity*, both within and between scales, which would be the properly sociological dimension of his thought. Understanding that we operate within a “universal sociological point of view”, and further assume Tarde’s categorical affirmation that “there is no science of the individual as such; all science is general; that is, it considers the individual as repeated, or as capable of indefinite repetition” (Tarde, 2000, p. 8), this tension between difference and invention on one hand, and reproduction or imitation on the other, establishes itself as an irreducible condition operative within the schema. Therefore, simply adopting one condition, for example, that of difference and invention, in the absence of the other produces a certain distortion of Tarde’s framework, given that they would have to be taken as jointly operative to account for the plenitude of phenomena under consideration. Difference possesses a logical and ontological priority in this schema, a priority which drives the inventive, evolutionary character of societies; however, it is not found in the absence of a coincident tendency towards reproduction and habit, and their associated probabilistic, statistical values. Given this, while difference is metaphysically foundational for Tarde, the sociological dimension, which is evidently irreducible in Tarde’s universal sociology or sociological metaphysics, equally presupposes an ongoing tendency on the part of reality to repeat itself, even *while* it differentiates itself.

Regarding the final metaphysical aspect of Tarde’s framework that we will consider, and in line with the previously mentioned “universal sociological point of view”, Tarde notably proposes a generalized “spiritualization” of the universe, which can be understood as a “universal psychomorphism” (Tarde, 2012, p. 16). Such a generalized spiritualization will in part serve to oppose itself to a mechanist, materialist perspective, which takes mechanically interacting matter as the ground of reality. By contrast, Tarde’s perspective will imply a wide-ranging attribution of the psychological forces of belief

7: Deleuze (2004), for example, defends an idea of Tarde as fundamentally a thinker of difference. Undoubtedly, this is no distortion; difference occupies a primordial place in his schema, however, as the title of Tarde’s book *The Laws of Imitation* highlights, so too do similarity and repetition and as we hope to show, the former cannot be functionally disassociated from the latter. In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze will define this relationship according to a very specific form of “co-constitution” of difference and repetition, “within” the virtual; however, it is not immediately obvious that this definition would be Tarde’s, even more so given Tarde’s explicit deployment of possibility, a category which Deleuze, in line with his strong Spinozist sympathies, denies.

and desire, or “belief-force” and “desire-force” (Tarde, 2012, p. 63) to all kinds of entity that make up the cosmos, be they biological or non-biological, human or non-human. This is a consequence of his monadology which assumes reality to be constituted by these agents or monads, agents we conceive of as quanta of action reflecting certain modes of possession. Belief and desire in this sense, will instantiate contrasting tendencies towards stabilization and dynamism that all entities manifest insofar as we accept the thesis of universal psychomorphism, and that characterise or “modify” these acts of possession, giving them a specific form. In the case of human societies particularly, the constitutive, reproductive mechanism that Tarde identifies as mediating the social transmission of beliefs and desires is imitation, which would be broadly analogous to reproductive patterns in biology or wave - like transmissions in physics. In other words, and as we will investigate in the next section, it is the psychological contents of beliefs and desires that one reproduces or repeats through imitation, or that are transmitted via the specifically human imitative contagions that sweep through human societies. Once again, we observe this *tendential* dimension of his sociology, that is, *a tendency towards sustaining a given line of reproductive transmission* of psychological contents. This is the case within human societies via imitation but also throughout the cosmos at large according to his precept of universal psychomorphism and mutual, monadological possession.

the sociological genesis of pragmatic agents

Having undertaken this metaphysical preamble then, the question before us becomes one of describing more precisely this mechanism - imitation - which drives the reproduction of beliefs and desires within human societies. With this in mind, there are two crucial passages which can be cited at length to introduce the issue. In one passage frequently presented to outline Tarde’s conception of imitation, we read how:

I have always given it (imitation) a very precise and characteristic meaning, that of the action at a distance⁸ of one mind upon another, an action which consists of a quasi-photographic reproduction of a cerebral image upon the sensitive plate of another brain. If the photographic plate became conscious at a given moment of what was happening to it, would the nature of the phenomenon be essentially changed? (Tarde, 1903, p. xiii-xiv, emphasis ours)

If Tarde uses the image of light rays travelling through space to “materialize” the idea of transmission in metaphysics (Tarde, 2012, p. 44, p. 60; 2013, p. 7, p. 58), and of signals in displacement as a more general cosmological condition (contagions, reproductions, vibrations, waves), he equally assumes the movement of imitations through human societies via this transmission sustained by and between brains that reproduce the beliefs and desires they encounter in their social environment. This leads Tarde to attribute an unconscious character to the sociological reproduction that occurs between brains, given that the imitations generated by this “sensitive photographic plate” express the latent tendencies of the imitative substrate itself, that is, the brain. In a somewhat contrasting fashion, however, Tarde also argues that:

8: It is important to note that Tarde refers to a polemical, “action at a distance” – different to action via direct impact and action in a fluid medium – which was active in physics research at that time, particularly as it pertained to the development of electromagnetism by Faraday and Maxwell as the field of phenomena bridging Newton’s classical mechanics and the soon-to-emerge relativistic physics. The problem is already referenced by Newton in his *Opticks* (1704), where he will argue that believing gravity to be “innate, inherent, and essential to matter, so that one body can act on another at a distance, through a vacuum, without mediation of anything else, by and through which their action and force may be conveyed from one to another, is to me so great an absurdity that I believe no man who has in philosophical matters a competent faculty of thinking, can ever fall into it.” (Newton, p. 74, emphasis ours) In this sense, Tarde’s whole human sociology would be grounded in accepting just such an “absurd possibility” of “action at a distance”. However, the context at the time of Tarde’s work with the concurrent emergence of electromagnetism, which operates in terms of fields, already meant that such forms of action were a markedly less absurd and significantly more viable alternative.

To thoroughly understand the essential social fact, as I perceive it, knowledge of the infinitely subtle facts of mind is necessary, and that the roots of even what seems to be the simplest and most superficial kind of sociology strike far down into the depths of the most inward and hidden parts of psychology and physiology. *Society is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism.* (Tarde, 2013, p. 125-126)

Here, it is worthwhile reading the two passages one in relation to the other. First and foremost, the foundational role of an unconscious dimension in the process of social formation is once again highlighted. As such, the previously discussed tendency towards repetitive, reproductive dynamics is manifest here through a certain automatic default of the imitative subject towards reproducing those beliefs and desires that they encounter in their social environment. Given this, *it is more probable or there is a tendency to reproduce* those beliefs and desires that we find around us, it is less probable that we invent them. It is in this sense that Tarde links this imitative process to suggestion, arguing that “the social like the hypnotic state is only a form of dream, a dream of command and a dream of action. *Both the somnambulist and the social man are possessed by the illusion that their ideas, all of which have been suggested to them, are spontaneous*” (Tarde, 2013, p. 112, emphasis ours). The social agent therefore, comes into being via a fundamentally ambivalent genesis, for, while our beliefs and desires are expressive of *our* identity and we *experience* them as such, that is, they provide the boundaries or frame for delineating our identity, *we in fact assimilate or absorb these subjective boundaries from the social environment around us.* However, in Tarde, one condition does not necessarily neutralize the other; the “external” origin of the psychological contents of our personhood does not make them “impersonal”; to the contrary, we *experience* them “personally”. Given this, we can understand that while these beliefs and desires are characteristic of *our* intentionality and personhood, they are equally found by our brain in and suggested to it by the *external* environment. In a profound sense, it is here that the overlapping roles which Tarde occupied in his professional life, of judge and statistician meet. For, if on one hand we experience ourselves as sovereign individuals guided by our own agency as self-determining, decision-making subjects, of the type which a judge might indeed face and rule on in a court of law, Tarde also understands that these subjects are the expression of a confluence of statistical movements that outstrip this apparent sovereignty on all sides. The contrasting perspectives of judge and statistician then, come together in Tarde’s very understanding of how social agents emerge and experience their agency. For Tarde, the social subject possesses a constitutively ambivalent structure, or arises out of a curious folding of the external, social world over the “subjective” interior so as to establish a defining boundary for this “inside”, which subsequently takes itself as self-originating, but which is internally displaced through this ambivalent genesis, as an introjection of the exterior as its foundational gesture.

Secondly, the sense of a potentially exacerbated “superficiality” which might arise from the metaphor of the “quasi-photographic reproduction of a cerebral image” in the first passage, is contextualized by understanding its relationship to the “infinitely subtle facts of mind” which “strike far down into the depths of the most inward and hidden parts of psychology and physiology”. The surface of the photographic image spreads out topologically over the physiological organization of a bodily “volume”, a process expressive of the assimilation of the pragmatic coordinates of belief and desire. Imitation is action *at a distance* because it configures and reconfigures the pragmatic dispositions of social agents. It really does produce an action at a distance by shaping the habits of actors pragmatically engaged in social environments and their tendencies towards this or that action or understanding. Tarde, therefore, ties this subjective consolidation to the formation of habits and memories, or what he refers to as the “imitation of self by self”, which he also labels “pre-social or subsocial imitation” (Tarde, 2013, p. 110). If imitation is a kind of somnambulism, it is also because we are woven of pre-reflexive

habits; as such, even “*within*” the ego or I, we encounter reproductive, imitative processes underway that weave the I together. Tarde describes how there is an “indefinite and inexhaustible continuation of these intricate and richly intersecting radiations” (ibid.) throughout the body’s nervous system, which constitutes our memories and habits, and which serve as the organized, embodied ground for our beliefs and desires. If there is imitation, a reproduction of beliefs and desires occurring at the macro scale of human society, there is imitation also underway at the “micro” scale of the body, through the “imitation of self by self” via a contraction of habits and memories. Here, we observe the empirical expression of the multi-scalar conception which we argued for in the previous section, present in the relationship between flows of imitations distributed both throughout society and the body, and between these two spheres.

In this sense, Tarde will understand that belief and desire are the formative psychological and physiological dimensions of the human I, with this entity concomitantly tied to the contraction of embodied postures grounded in bodily repetition. Moreover, Tarde will describe how “belief and desire play exactly the same role in the ego, with respect to sensations, as do space and time in the external world with respect to material elements” (Tarde, 2012, p. 16-17). Belief and desire spatially and temporally coordinate and position the sensational life of the subject, constituting agents insofar as these psychological contents instantiate subjects in “space” and “time”, through the topological spreading out of the photographic image over the physiological organization of the body. Belief, through its “spatializing” character, *tends* to sediment the sensational life of the agent “statically”, while desire, via its “temporalizing” character, tends to set the sensational life of the subject in motion, or acts as the dynamic force mobilizing the ego. Belief and desire as such, function as the mutually constitutive but contrasting, tendential forces that compose the social agent, two poles that define a psychological continuum that exists along a curve of variable intensity (Tarde, 2012, p.17), from absolute certainty to relative doubt, or from a fervent desire to lukewarm enthusiasm. In this sense, Tarde will further argue that:

The activity of the I is manifest through a double reaction against the impressions of the exterior. Far from being the result of a simple juxtaposition, the connection between images and sensations within us occurs due to a double amalgam: belief and desire. Through belief the I distinguishes itself and distinguishes; through desire the I modifies itself and modifies (Tarde, 2007, p. 135)⁹

Given this, we deal with the active “I” wherein belief is that dimension which tends towards intellectual, conceptual stabilization and grounding, and desire is a contrasting force which incorporates the dynamic and mobile aspects of the social agent. Each force, belief and desire, as a tendency defining pragmatic agents, is active; that is, the agent actively tends to recreate itself *through* these coordinates, moving either towards conceptual consolidation or pragmatic dynamism as the two contrasting poles that structure this “double reaction against the impressions of the exterior”. However, it is vital that we once again emphasize that the content that defines the agency of the social subject is, in fact, *assimilated imitatively from the exterior*. Beliefs and desires do constitute agents; however, these agents appropriate these beliefs and desires from their social environment. The question arises therefore, regarding the type of entity we are dealing with, which is defined in its *first-personal* identity through being affected by its environment and *that consolidates a personal identity through this process of affection*. In dealing with the notions of identity and personhood, with the “I” or the “ego”, we are considering some variety of logically complex, pragmatic “object” or structure. Imitative social subjects attain perso-

⁹: In this instance where an already existing English translation was unavailable and without access to the original French, I have provided my own translation into English of the existing Portuguese translation.

hood, but do so through a condition of porousness and by virtue of their receptiveness to the social environment.

The ambivalent structure instantiated between inside and outside within the imitative formation of social agents presupposes a *complex* physiological organization of embodied subjects that interact with reproductive waves passing through society. Here, the term complex is invoked according to its most primitive etymology of *entwining* or *braiding together*, with imitation acting as the mechanism whereby the inside and the outside are braided one over the other, and where societies are woven together by means of such entwining. This weave is the empirical expression of the metaphysical condition according to which all monadological entities are proprietors that possess a set of other such proprietors, *and become what they are through these acts of possession*. Imitation is not a mere “surface process” taking place through an exchange of “images” but rather a tendency towards the *complex* constitution of coordinated embodied subjects composed of habits and memories, “striking far down into the depths of the most inward and hidden parts of psychology and physiology”. Canguilhem makes an observation that will be remarkably prescient at this point, when he asserts that “to imitate is not only to copy an appearance, *it is to reproduce a tendency, to prolong an intimate movement*” (Canguilhem, 1991, , p. 41). This idea of prolonging an intimate movement between agents who are agents in so far as they imitate one another, that is, who prolong this transmission of intimate intentional postures, which spread contagiously throughout societies, is central to the embodied formation of social subjects in Tarde’s sociology.

In a very direct sense then, Tarde makes the agency of any one social agent contingent on that of the others, arguing that “in a society no individual can act socially, *or show himself in any respect*, without the collaboration of a great number of other individuals, most of them unknown to him” (Tarde, 2012, p. 34, emphasis ours). In assuming the generality of imitation in society, Tarde asserts that “my” agency, so as to become effective, must be embedded in and folded over the action and agency of others, or, must be structured around the scaffolding of the other’s action and thought. This is precisely because, in a pragmatic social context, effective action must be coordinated with the intentional postures of our peers, with their own beliefs and desires, *to be effective*, such that coordination becomes the condition of possibility for efficacy and for the consolidation of social agency. The issue of coordination, as it arises in Leibniz’s monadology in the guise of preestablished harmony, and which resurfaces in Tarde’s neomonadology, through the withdrawal of the harmonizing instance – God – which Leibniz establishes to resolve this question,¹⁰ raises the question of how social agents guarantee the coordination of their acts. Simply put, in the absence of God, imitation becomes the most parsimonious response to the coordination problem.¹¹ We tend to imitate because it most reliably leads to the coordination of my actions with those of my peers and as such, guarantees my agency. As a corollary, the idea of “my action” becomes from the outset an ambivalent or at least bivalent one, and constitutively so. To imitate the beliefs and desires of the other and take them on as my own, and to do this, in some sense unconsciously, like a sleepwalker as Tarde will say, is to stake a particular claim regarding the structure of *personal* action and agency as *sociologically* constituted. Furthermore, it is to place at the centre of agency a condition of finitude in relation to any simple, transparent Cartesian consciousness. If Freud presented one significant theory of the unconscious, we can argue that Tarde’s sociology is grounded in an equally far-reaching, alternative concep-

10: For a more extensive discussion of this question, see Teixeira (2017, p. 83)

11: A clear example of such a phenomenon would be the emergence over time of the increasingly conventional syntactic patterns characteristic of languages. In this sense, language use tends to become conventional because adopting established syntactic patterns increases the likelihood of linguistic communication’s effectiveness. Simply put, it is more likely that I will effectively communicate when I adopt those syntactic structures which the other language user “has in mind”. By contrast, a speaker or writer who spontaneously alters the syntactic structure of their communication, decreases the likelihood and thus efficacy of their communication, which acts as a negative incentive towards an action pathway. As such, reproducing conventional syntax is already in itself a type of unconscious, proto-imitation. In this manner, a conventionalizing tendency arises within the very structure of intersubjective interaction at a linguistic level; see: Christiansen e Charter (2023).

tion, operating according to a pragmatic rather than a libidinal drive, producing the composition of a weave of habits and memories stitched together on an imitative loom. It involves the constitution of the beliefs and desires of social agents via a fundamentally unconscious dynamic of assimilation of intentionality.

the pragmatic usefulness of statistical perception

Having considered certain anthropological dimensions of Tarde's thought in the preceding second section, stemming from the metaphysical precepts outlined in the first section, we will now turn to the role of statistics in Tarde's thought. In so doing, we should note from the outset that for Tarde "the method of statistics is preeminently the sociological method" (Tarde, 2013, p. 155). The field of statistics is foundational to Tarde's sociological framework, such that it becomes important to understand how it overlaps with the consolidation of pragmatic, social agents via the assimilation of beliefs and desires from the external social environment, which further ties into his metaphysics, in the case of the monadological tendency towards aggregation in societies. This in turn involves a consideration of the graphical figures themselves employed in the expression of statistical data, particularly the plotting of tendential curves.

In his essay *Gabriel Tarde and Statistical Movement*, Emmanuel Didier 2010 makes an observation central to our argument here, noting that:

Tarde stresses that the production of figures is a creative endeavour deserving the name of art. Admittedly it is not one of the fine arts, but it is a craft; something is produced, something is added, it is not diminution. *Statistics brings forward, artistically, the similarities of the world* (Didier, 2010, p. 167-168, emphasis ours).

As such, statistics possesses an artisanal dimension, being itself a practice with a certain aesthetic valence that renders us sensitive to the reproductive tendencies of reality that we have previously observed as foundational to our metaphysics and of our own place as humans within this ecology according to our own specific form of possession. Tarde himself asserts that "if archaeology is the collection and classification of similar products *where the highest possible degree of similarity is the most important thing, Statistics is an enumeration of acts which are as much alike as possible*" (Tarde, 2013, p. 151, emphasis ours). The ongoing consolidation of intentionality by social agents – that is, the tendency of multiple agents to come together imitatively and in this manner, to constitute their own personal agency – becomes, through tracing the "aesthetic" form of statistical curves, *lines of identity*. Such a curve instantiates the converging approximation towards a linear expression of a multiplicity of examples of a given belief or desire across the variable intensity of their reproduction over time. These are "the networks or relational flows that spread out and connect everything to everything else" at a metaphysical level, or the forms of social agency that present both historical continuity and transformation at an anthropological level, which can be tracked in an empirical sense through the addition of novel lines to graphical tables. In considering the diagrammatic presentation of statistical data, one deals with the graphical expression of the pragmatic synthesis of social subjects grounded in the subsocial or presocial "micro"-radiations of imitations of "self by self" within the body, which in turn reflects the transmission of beliefs and desires at the broader social scale.

One passage from *The Laws of Imitation*, particularly rich in associative content, contains an outline of how Tarde conceives of statistics both in a conceptual, "metaphysical" sense but also in terms being a graphical, "aesthetic" and even practical endeavor. Statistics emerges as a field that demonstrates a diversity of elements, but particularly highlighting the intimate connection between metaphysics and sociology which Tarde seeks to establish. Here, he suggests considering:

any graphical curve, that for example, of criminal recidivists for the last fifty years. If its physiognomy is unlike that of the human face, is it not, at least, like the silhouette of hills and vales, or, since it is a question of movement, - for statistics we speak quite properly of the *movement* of criminality, of birth or marriage rates, - like the sinuous lines, the sharp rises and sudden falls, in the flight of a swallow? Let me stop a moment at this comparison and consider if it is specious. Why should the statistical diagrams that are gradually traced out on this paper from accumulations of successive crimes and misdemeanours-whose records are transmitted in official reports to the government, from the government in annual returns to the bureau of statistics at Paris and from this bureau, in blue books, to the magistrates of the different tribunals-why should these silhouettes, *which likewise give visible expression to masses or series of coexistent or successive facts*, be the only one to be taken as symbolical, whereas the line traced on my retina by the flight of a swallow is deemed an inherent reality in the being which it expresses and which essentially consists, *it seems to me, of moving figures, of movements in an imaginary space? Is there really less symbolism in one case than in the other?* Is not a retinal image, the curve traced on my retina by the flight of this swallow, merely the expression of a mass of facts (the different states of the bird) which we have not the slightest reason in the world to consider as analogous to our visual impression? (Tarde, 2013, p. 190-191, emphasis ours)

In surveying the relevance of statistics here, Tarde ranges over questions as diverse as practical issues related to the institutional collation and production of statistical data - which evidently bears out his own subsequent experience at the Ministry of Justice and his already ample reflections as a criminologist - to a metaphysical consideration about the nature of the movement of bodies and the place of statistics therein. Here, Tarde makes a metaphysical claim which ties together phenomena as diverse as the trajectory of a rigid body and the transmission and variable intensity of certain beliefs and desires as they travel throughout a society we are in a certain sense, all *recidivist* imitators - with the production of statistical data and the consequent practice of tracing curves acting as the means of unifying these diverse aspects. He does this because the graphical curve just as easily includes the line of flight of a swallow as a sequence of monadic states of a body in motion, as the movement expressed by a multiplicity of imitative, possessive acts within human social constitution, expressing the reproductive flow of a certain type of recidivist posture throughout a society. Given this, the graphical curve, as the synthetic expression of multiple acts of assimilation related to the broader metaphysical assertion regarding the tendency of monads to assemble via mutual possession, becomes a fulcrum for our understanding. The statistical perspective unites both an ontology of flows and continuities as sociologically constitutive of reality in general, and the proposal of an artisanal practice for the tracing of curves, which crystalize a sensitivity towards this foundational metaphysical condition.

As such, it is notable that for Tarde, statistics is tantamount to a type of “sociological perception”. Indeed, in making this assertion, Tarde is at pains to point out that this would not be any mere metaphor. In returning to the question of the relationship between perception and statistics a little later on, he argues that:

I might freely say, then, that each of our senses gives us, in its own way and from its special point of view, the statistics of the external world. Their characteristic sensations are in a certain way their special graphical tables. Every sensation – colour, sound, taste, etc., - is only a *number*, a collection of innumerable like units of vibrations that are represented collectively by this single figure. (Tarde, 2013, p. 193-194).

The consolidation of *the line of flight of a swallow* as a series of monadological states, and the resolution of the *image* of that line of flight on my retina, and finally the tracing of some graphical curve on a page, would not be radically distinct phenomena. They testify to a certain aggregative dynamic active in the constitution of reality in general, that is, we are considering a metaphysical condition. The vibratory movement, which eventually condenses into the continuous form of a “single figure” means that for Tarde, the field of statistics with its associated graphical expression, can be understood as an extension of our sensory make-up, where the latter process of artisanal, graphical expression would be continuous with rather than qualitatively distinct from sensation more generally. Further elaborating this convergence between perception and statistics, Tarde will describe how:

In exactly the same way as we are assailed when we open our eyes by the vibrations of the ether which tell us of the approach or withdrawal of such and such a so-called body and of many other things of a similar nature. This information is interesting from the point of view of the conservation and development of our organs, just as the former *news* is interesting from the point of view of the conservation and development of our social being, of our reputation and wealth, of our power, and of our honour. (Tarde, 2013, p.192-193)

Tarde understands therefore, that just as we are biological beings with “statistical” sensory input connected to this dimension of our make-up, *as social beings* dealing with our imitative integration into the social environment, there could equally be a form of “sensory input” commensurate to this dimension of our being. Here we return to the issue of somnambulism, given that in understanding imitation as a fundamentally unconscious process, such that for Tarde we tend to be unaware of its operation, statistics has a clear function for the social subject, as a tool for bringing to light that foundational, constitutive dynamic in which social agents participate in a more or less unconscious manner. If as social beings, we are formed by a fundamentally unconscious imitative process, sociology provides the tools to extend our sensitivity into the field of genetic processes in which we are enmeshed as mutually possessive, co-constitutive entities, bringing this condition more clearly to our awareness.

For Tarde then, the need for this type of perception arises because the tendency to imitate, as the dynamic which weaves together the social fabric, *is unconscious*. However, Tarde will also assume the possibility of a modulation of this character of imitation, arguing that there is a distinction between “conscious and unconscious imitation, intentional or spontaneous, voluntary and involuntary” (Tarde, 2013, p. 280). Tarde understands that there is the potential for the substitution of “mechanical, unreflective imitation” with “rational, voluntary imitation” (186), further arguing that “the progress of civilization makes subjection to imitation at the same time *more personal and more rational*” (Tarde, 2013, p.120, emphasis ours). This represents probably the most programmatic aspect of Tarde’s sociological proposal, given that if social subjects tend unconsciously to assimilate the beliefs and desires that they find in their social environment, sociology, understood and practiced according to such a form of “perception”, provides the organ directed at this vital facet of our social character. For the increasingly sociologically informed agents that Tarde envisions, the unconscious constitutive condition becomes ever more apparent, moving increasingly into the field of our awareness. Such subjects become more sensitive to the types of imitations that they “assimilate”, and approach more intimately their “*own*” personhood, which reflects precisely that original difference – as we saw in the first section – that Tarde understands as metaphysically primordial in the formation of existence, that is, *between* difference and repetition. Each individual increasingly comes to reflect this difference while simultaneously situating themselves imitatively in some contingent social context or other. As societies evolve therefore,

persons become ever more “personal” and differentiated through approaching their own differences more intimately, by imitating more “consciously” and “rationally”. For Tarde, rationality does not produce social homogenization, but rather the possibility for greater personal differentiation, within the space of social reproduction.

final considerations

Gabriel Tarde’s sociology emerges as a sociological framework that equally seeks to function as a full-blown metaphysics. Starting from a set of general principles: universal sociology (sociology *as* metaphysics); the diversity of forms of mutual possession; the mutually conditional character of difference and similarity; multiscalar explanatory movements; the cosmologically general and mutually conditional character of belief and desire, we outlined Tarde’s metaphysical schema as a set of interrelated functions. This led us to his specifically anthropological sociology which empirically reiterates the metaphysical precepts at the level of human social interaction. Imitation functions as the medium of transmission of contingently situated pragmatic postures constitutive of social agents in given human societies. The relationship between memory and habit at the “pre-social” or “subsocial” level as grounding the circulation of beliefs and desires at the sociological level empirically instantiates the multiscalar character we argued for in the previous section. In the final part, we showed how statistics according to Tarde, serves as a reflexive presentation of the social environment wherein social agents can modulate their relationship to the imitatively generated surroundings constitutive of their agency. For Tarde, this would allow them to arrive at a more personal and differentiated expression of identity, once again as a more empirically particularized expression of the foundational metaphysical relationship between reproduction and difference, as we observed in the first section.

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