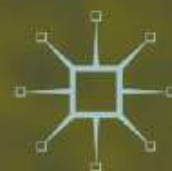


PALGRAVE STUDIES IN
RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

FROM TARDE TO DELEUZE & FOUCAULT

The Infinitesimal
Revolution

SERGIO TONKONOFF



FOREWORD

François Dépelteau

Tarde, Deleuze, Foucault and Relational-processual Sociology

Several decades ago, the name Gabriel Tarde was rarely heard. Once an intellectual leader in France, Tarde was left far away at the periphery of the social sciences. When his name was mentioned in the literature, it was usually in negative ways. For example, some specialists of social movements referred to him as an example of what should not be done in the analysis of collective action. In few words, Tarde's theory was barely presented and quickly dismissed for reducing collective behaviors to "irrational" processes of imitation, and for neglecting other crucial factors such as "structural" and organizational ones.

As many have noticed more recently, Tarde's relegation to the periphery came with the ascendancy of the general idea that hidden and "external" social forces impose themselves on individuals and groups. Durkheim's hypothesis that social phenomena are "social things" – or act as such – is an excellent example of this type of core world view. It is quite well known now that Tarde and Durkheim were involved in some sort of intellectual battle at the beginning of the twentieth century on these types of fundamental issues, and that Durkheim "won" it. Through the works of people such as T. Parsons, L. Althusser and many others, the formidable influence of structuralism in the human sciences also contributed to the prevalence of the idea that our social life is influenced by hidden social forces which can be revealed only by "scientific" analyses. Therefore, many social scientists have agreed on one general guiding principle: their main function is to reveal more or less constraining or enabling social "regularities" (or "social structures") to non-specialists.

Basically, many sociologists have shown individuals they are not “free” since their lives and actions are fully or partially determined by various pre-existing social “regularities” having causal powers, and it is those causal powers which explain the durability (and solidity) of these “structures.” If we push this logic to its logical limit, we end up with a tautological cycle of social reproduction where the “structures” determine the actions which reproduce the “structures.” In order to explain social change, sociologists added that this circle of social reproduction can be broken by individuals using their “agency” (their capacity to act in a different way) through some moments of “collective effervescence” or “corporate action,” for example.

Regardless of the lack of one Kuhnian “paradigm,” this kind of view has appeared to many of us as solid ontological foundation assuring the distinctiveness and legitimacy of sociology as a “scientific” discipline. Sociology found an “object” (the causal powers of social “things” or “structures”); this “object” is different from those of psychology and biology; and it can be studied in “scientific” ways, by staying away from philosophical speculations and pure deductions. In this spirit, methodological tools have been developed to reveal these social “regularities” which are supposed to show that individuals and groups are determined by “structural” forces like “society,” “social systems” or “class positions.” Among other things, variable analyses have become prevalent practices of this kind. For many sociologists, this is what “scientific” sociology is all about. As with the classical study by Durkheim on the social causes of suicide, even the most individual actions are seen as the effects of “macro” forces. Specific, contextualized actions – even suicides – become “dependent variables” determined by social “independent variables” like the level of social integration or the clarity and imposition of collective norms and rules. By finding the right indicators of these “independent variables,” and by making statistical correlations (and related deductions), sociologists bring to light the social “dependent variables” which are at play. This type of sociological practice would bring us closer to the natural sciences. By doing so, it would play a key positive role in the common games of distinction and imitation of modern sciences. The use of mathematics, the search for regularities by “controlling” “variables” and the importation of some scientific words such as “laboratory,” social “laws,” and “prediction” gives credibility to disciplines which have often been pejoratively labelled as “soft,” “immature,” and “impure” sciences. There is little doubt that Durkheim, for instance, was well aware of these games of distinction and

imitation dominated by the more prestigious “hard” or “pure” sciences, such as physics or chemistry, when he was trying to establish sociology as a “scientific” discipline in France.

It is also well known that this type of sociology leads to the problematic idea that human beings would be determined in some mechanical ways like gases or any other entity with no reflexivity. In effect, other social thinkers, such as M. Weber, A. Schultz, H. Blumer, G. H. Mead, and P. Winch, rejected this type of sociology by insisting on the importance of reflexivity, values, perceptions of the reality, and the creativity of action. In spite of all of this; despite the fact that specific behaviors cannot be simply and perfectly predicted due to the complexity of social life in the real world, but only within the limits of probability; and in spite of all the difficulties one encounters when trying to control “independent variables” without the kind of laboratories specialists can use in some natural sciences; many social scientists have shown incredible resilience and imagination to show that *C happens at X% when B is self-acting on A*.

This kind of positivistic knowledge is useful in many ways. For instance, and if and when it is true of course, who could seriously argue that we do not need to know, everything else being equal, that a state of anomie increases the number of suicides in any one society? The fact remains that, in spite of its real or potential relevance, this type of sociology has been contested since the very beginning of its implementation. In few words, many competent sociologists have argued that more or less deterministic social thinkers based their sociological explanations on false and unnecessary ontological premises. And by doing so, they promulgate distorted perceptions of our social life which seriously limits the positive contributions – or the “promises” – of sociology. G. Tarde was among the first to protest against this type of sociology, and more precisely against Durkheim and his idea of “external” and “constraining” “social things.” For him, by detaching the “society” from the individuals who co-produce it, by seeing it as “external” to the individuals, Durkheim was proposing a metaphysical concept which cannot be accepted in any type of scientific and empirical discipline. It was a fundamental mistake, Tarde said. This mistake can only create a problematic gap between sociologists and the study of relations between people at the so-called “micro” level – the only level where social phenomena are made.

In one way or another, this is the kind of fundamental issues that are raised by these colleagues who are “rediscovering” the texts of Tarde these days. This “rediscovery” has been made through the new editions and

“rediscovery” of the works of Tarde in recent decades, but it also happened through the works of other contemporary social thinkers who have explicitly (Deleuze, Latour) or maybe implicitly (Foucault) been influenced by G. Tarde. This is one reason why this book of S. Tonkonoff is important and relevant for us today. Social thinkers like Deleuze and Latour quickly presented some general ideas of Tarde. S. Tonkonoff offers us more detailed explanations about Tarde’s sociological ideas and their importance. By doing this, he also helps us to see the works of Deleuze and Foucault from another angle which has not been deeply explored in the literature so far. This is not an easy task since Tarde’s (and Deleuze’s as well) writing style makes their explanations quite difficult to deal with. It can be quite obscure and almost annoying even for the most patient reader. However, S. Tonkonoff proposes a process of clarification of some of the most important and interrelated sociological ideas of Tarde, Deleuze, and Foucault.

Furthermore, S. Tonkonoff is not trying to save Tarde from some form of injustice related to his marginalization in the academic world. The idea is to do this rediscovery work in order to improve our understanding of our social life. We might disagree with some of its explanations, but this book is relevant in part because it invites us to come back to some fundamental issues in sociology, to revise some typical concepts such as “institutions,” “social forces,” “social fields,” “society,” “social system,” and “organization”; and to discuss unusual sociological ones such as “flows,” “rizhome,” “imitation,” “infiniteness,” and “desire.” It is an invitation to discuss basic and general views, principles, and concepts which guide our sociological practices. More precisely, S. Tonkonoff is proposing another “image” of our social universe based on a different sociological “grammar” by using views and concepts offered by Tarde and coupling them with some ideas and concepts of G. Deleuze and M. Foucault. Of course, this work is incomplete. Many other links should be made. His quite abstract conception of “social field,” for instance, should eventually be compared to the more concrete ones of P. Bourdieu and others. Besides, other compatible approaches could be integrated. The incorporation of the work of B. Latour is an obvious missing link in this respect. Many other works should eventually be integrated, such as the “processual-relational” works of A. N. Whitehead, the work of M. Weber, the works of many symbolic interactionists (Blumer, Becker, Strauss . . .), the “relational manifesto” of M. Emirbayer, and definitely O. Pyyhtonen’s recent book *More-Than-*

Human Sociology. Besides, a lot of work also needs to be done at the methodological level in order to eventually operationalize the approach.

Overall, in this logic, the main goal is to come with one not-so-new sociological “grammar” based on “relational-processual” guiding world views, principles, concepts, and methods made and used for the study of the emergences, metamorphoses, and disintegrations of multiple social phenomena. This processual approach is one of the major tendencies one can find in relational sociology these days, as we will see in the upcoming *Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology* (Dépelteau 2017). But this approach, so far, is a more or less disorganized work-in-progress. The publication of this book should be seen as one action in a longer chain of interactions, where some of the most important principles, world views, and concepts of this emerging “relational-processual” sociology are developed by analyzing the works of G. Tarde, G. Deleuze, and M. Foucault. This is not the only way to do it, but it is certainly an interesting one.

To conclude, and beyond all the concepts presented and defined in this book, I think we can identify the following general principles and ideas for this emerging “relational-processual” sociology:

- This is a *deeply “relational-processual”* sociology since social phenomena are seen as relations between individuals and what is beyond or below them. As Sergio himself suggested to me after reading the draft of this foreword (his own words):

This “relational-processual” sociology sees social phenomena as a relation between collective flows or streams. These flows would be trans- and infra- individual currents, passing through biological bodies, making “in them,” in the bodies, individuals. Individual then would be a secondary category regarding these impersonal flows. Rumors, fashions, currents of opinion are flows, but also traditions and customs are flows. The first ones are fast repetitions of a model, the second ones are slower repetitions of a model – and both of them are impersonal processes. The real relations and interactions are between these flows. Every individual would be an intersection of many of both types of flows: the specific relation between them in each body produces each individual as a specific psycho-social reality. These flows can also “unmake” individuals, and they do it many times a day. An “un-made” individual is somebody in a “state of multitude”. This is what I’m writing for the conclusions.

In this sense, and generally speaking, this is an invitation to change our perception of “society.” We should abandon “panoramic” views of “society” in favor of “the detailed exploration of the elemental modes of production, reproduction, and metamorphosis of social assemblages” (p. 41).

- The old dualism between “holism” and “individualism” is replaced by the study of the “*social*” defined as a “plural and heterogeneous field of interactions” (p. 46).
- This study of the modes of production of “social assemblages” leads us to the observation “the real agents and the real actions,” at the so-called “micro-level”. This is an invitation to accept the high complexity of social life where the “agents” and the “real actions” are “infinitely varied and infinitely small” (p. 41).
- The analysis of *larger social phenomena* is not rejected, but sociologists are invited to study their “formation, developments, and transformations” though the analyses of “the interpersonal bonds [understood as mentioned above] in its local details” (p. 41).
- This is a “processual” sociology, meaning that social phenomena are seen as being dynamic, fluid social processes.
- It means we are talking about a social universe where “regularities” coming from similar actions and relations can be disrupted, altered, or destroyed by “inventions” of ways to interact, to normalize behaviors and bodies, etc. It is a universe in constant tension due to processes of “imitation,” “counter-imitation,” and “invention” (p. 58).
- A such, History is not made of one “single drama” (like class struggles) but by “innumerable scenes of duels, conjunctions, and propagations, multiplied on various scales” (p. 75). And in this respect, History has no ending. It is open. It is a constant flow of unpredictable and multiple interactions (where power is a relation and not a substance one possesses like a “capital” or aces in a game of cards).
- This is also a sociology connected to the problems of “ordinary” people (and others), where people can imitate with a low level of reflexivity or make “inventions” to find “specific responses to problems, and even to specific ‘matters or urgency’” (p. 77).

Hopefully, colleagues interested by the emergence of a “relational-processual” sociology will read this book carefully and make connections with

other compatible social thinkers. Thanks to these efforts, we could end up with one form of collective and relatively “disciplined” (in a non-political way) production of sociological knowledge, coming from the (critical and dynamic) use of a coherent set of principles, concepts, and methodological tools used to produce realistic, critical, and pragmatic sociological knowledge. We can also sincerely hope that other sociologists will carefully analyze this book in order to show the limits of this type of sociology. A healthy dose of controversy is also good for sociology.