Departmental Papers (ASC)   Annenberg School for Communication

2006

Rediscovering Gabriel Tarde

Elihu Katz
University of Pennsylvania, ekatz@asc.upenn.edu

Rediscovering Gabriel Tarde

Abstract

Gabriel Tarde (l843–1904) is thought to have "lost" his debates with Durkheim by insisting that sociology ought to occupy itself with observable interpersonal processes. Given contemporary interest in such processes—much abetted by the computer—Tarde's reputation is being rehabilitated. Terry Clark (1969) was first to notice that Tarde (1898) had anticipated Lazarzfeld's two-step flow of communication. Tarde's work has bearing on social networks, interpersonal influence, diffusion of innovation, and the aggregation of public opinion.

Disciplines
Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Rediscovering Gabriel Tarde

ELIHU KATZ

Gabriel Tarde (l843–1904) is thought to have "lost" his debates with Durkheim by insisting that sociology ought to occupy itself with observable interpersonal processes. Given contemporary interest in such processes—much abetted by the computer—Tarde's reputation is being rehabilitated. Terry Clark (1969) was first to notice that Tarde (1898) had anticipated Lazarzfeld's two-step flow of communication. Tarde's work has bearing on social networks, interpersonal influence, diffusion of innovation, and the aggregation of public opinion.

During the oral exam on my doctoral thesis—later to become Part 1 of *Personal Influence*—Robert Merton asked me to name the scholar who debated Durkheim on the nature of sociology. It was the one question to which I had no answer. This failure is all the more embarrassing now, 50 years later, in as much as intellectual historians such as Terry Clark(1969) and Serge Moscovici (1985) pay homage to the French social psychologist, Gabriel Tarde, for having anticipated the "two-step flow of communication" and other propositions in the classic Columbia voting studies by Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) and Berelson et al. (1954) and in *Personal Influence* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). At least in some measure, it accounts for my many years of ardent advocacy of Tarde's all but forgotten work on opinion and communication. But penance aside, the rediscovery of this forefather—not just by me—has amply justified the effort. His renewed presence can enliven almost every aspect of current work on political communication, on diffusion of innovation, on social network theory, on public opinion, on collective behavior, and on the deliberative democracy of the "public sphere."

Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904) achieved renown in turn-of-the-century France. To his professional training in the law, he added criminology, statistics, and social psychology, and moved from the provincial courtroom of his aristocratic forebears to the College de France. "Tarde held virtually every leader position open to a French social scientist outside the university system," says Terry Clark. While he published on a wide variety of sociological and philosophical issues in France, his best-known work, *The Laws of Imitation* (1880), was translated into English only in 1903, 1 year before his death. In the first half of the new century, his ideas were rather well known and appreciated among American sociologists and anthropologists interested in questions of interaction, diffusion, crowds, and publics. This is well documented in Clark (1969, pp. 62–69) and in Sorokin (1928, 1941).[1] His reputation gradually faded, however, not only in the United States but in France as well. And yet, there are signs of revival in both countries.

Why Tarde's Reputation Waned

It is widely believed that Tarde's debates with Durkheim in 1902 to 1904 were the beginning of his undoing. In a word (Lukes, 1972; Clark, 1969), Durkheim argued that sociology should be conceptualized on a level of its own, one that avoids reduction to individual-level psychology. Tarde argued that society is made up of individuals, and that the social psychology of their interaction brings about social structures and change. Durkheim focused on the norms that constrain behavior, as if these were imposed from somewhere "outside," while Tarde saw these norms as the products of interaction. Both Clark and Lukes remark that these two positions are not in necessary disagreement and, moreover, it is not at all clear that Tarde "lost" the debates. This is even more obvious nowadays when seething social networks are being uncovered everywhere—in science, in bureaucracy, in politics—thanks to microsociological theory and the wonders of the computer (e.g., Burt, 1987). In this sense Tarde may rise again; at the very least, he deserves a retrial.

A second explanation for the decline in Tarde's popularity points a finger at his unfortunate use of the concept "imitation," which, on the face of it, is strictly out of favor. It sounds altogether too mechanistic and unthinking, although it may well be that he had "influence"—a better word—in mind. Moreover, and in spite of its mechanical sound, Tarde's "imitation" seems to place rather heavy emphasis on voluntarism, especially after society became more egalitarian (Moscovici, 1985). As in the debate with Durkheim, external constraints—not only normative, but coercive—are seemingly ignored in favor of follow-the-leader. This, as it happens, echoes one of the reasons for the ups and downs of diffusion research: Studies of diffusion have too often assigned the spread of change to individual decisions to "adopt." Rightly or wrongly, Durkheim's ostensible victory, together with the academically incorrect concept of "imitation"—and the connection between the two—help us understand, or at least to ponder, the reversal of Tarde's scientific reputation. Sorokin (1928, p. 636) feels that he was not scientific enough from the outset.

Why and Where Tarde Is Resurfacing

Let me indicate several of the areas in which Tarde is being rediscovered and/or where he usefulness of his ideas. In doing so, I will draw on what I have learned from *The Laws of Imitation* and, especially, from his (1898/1989) "Opinion and Conversation," which my students and I have been studying line by line (Katz et al., 1998).[2] I am only casually acquainted with most of the rest of his writings, except for the translated excerpts and discussion in Clark (1969) and secondary sources.

Mass Communication

To begin at my own beginning, let's revisit Paul Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University. In *The People's Choice*, Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) made the serendipitous discovery that personal influence was still a force to reckon with, even in the era of mass communication. In his study of how voters made up their minds in the 1940 presidential election, he found that respondents implicated their close associates—family and

friends—in their decisions, no less, perhaps more, than they attributed influence to the radio and to newspapers. In a further step, he discovered that these influentials—he called them "opinion leaders"—were themselves more exposed (and influenced?) by the media than were those whom they had influenced. He called this "the two-step flow of communication," suggesting that the media may exert indirect influence via intermediaries who vet the messages they receive and selectively pass them along to their primary groups. As we know now, this is the role that Tarde (1898) assigned to conversation. Tarde was not so much interested in leading and following, but in the proposition that "if people did not talk, it would be futile to publish newspapers . . . they would exercise no durable or profound influence; they would be like a vibrating string without a sounding board" (in Clark, 1969, p. 307). Lazarsfeld certainly had knowledge of Tarde—I know this, as a student, despite my failings—even though Lazarsfeld reported to Clark, in a personal communication, that he and his associates were unfamiliar with Tarde's relevance "at the time" (Clark, 1969, p. 69), presumably referring to the 1940 election study.

This resonates with the explicit reference to Tarde in *Voting* (Berelson et al., 1954), the 1948 sequel. "When *The People's Choice* was written," according to the authors (p. 300), "this side of Tarde's ideas was not known to the authors. . . . He felt that careful empirical study of conversations was basic to sociology; and he suggested a large number of hypotheses as to who talked to whom about what and how much, and in terms of the social characteristics of the interlocutors and of variations in the historical scene." Methodologically, the authors concluded, "the correct solution is to make the conversation—the pair or group of interlocutors—the unit of analysis. This brings us back, full circle, to thinking which parallels Tarde's ideas."

And, indeed, in the Decatur study reported in *Personal Influence*, the role of conversation and the two-step flow were investigated in realms of decision making other than voting. As pointed out in Part 1 of the book, this was a time when other areas of social research—industrial sociology, military studies, psychotherapy—were also discovering the persistence of primary groups in modern society, as Tarde never doubted.

Thus did the Lazarsfeld studies carry the word of Tarde into the fertile field of network theory. Once sociometry could be incorporated into social surveys—as the Decatur studies had begun to do—it became possible to explore the flow of influence as a function of the interaction of individuals, social networks, and mass media.

Diffusion Research

One of the applications of burgeoning network theory is the study of diffusion of innovation. Tarde, like Simmel (1904/1957), proposed that change—in fashion, for example—followed a trickle-down pattern, progressing from higher to lower strata. In fact, the Decatur study found otherwise—except, perhaps, in the political realm; recently, Diana Crane (1999, 2000) also found otherwise.

Gradually, then, the methodology of Lazarsfeld's decision studies could be transformed into full-blown studies of the diffusion of innovation. Studies of the spread of fluoridation (Crain et al., 1969) and of the progress of a new antibiotic in communities of doctors (Coleman, Katz, & Menzel, 1966) could show the joint workings of mass media and personal

influence—Tarde's conversation—in the context of public and private health. Network theorists and market researchers have replicated the drug study several times with varying results, of which Burt's (l987) "structural equivalence"—connecting diffusion research with research on social capital—has evoked major interest. Granovetter's (1973) "weak ties" was an early forerunner of these ideas. Duncan Watts's (2003) newer work has only recently acknowledged this aspect of its heritage.

Interest in patterns of diffusion may be said to characterize all of the social sciences and most of the humanities and some of the hard sciences as well—whether it is in the spread of disease, or children's games, or of religions. Tarde and Sorokin (1928) were well aware of the similarities (and differences) among these problems, and of their centrality for the study of change. Rural sociology's concern for the role of agricultural extension in the diffusion of new farm practices alludes to the paternity of Tarde. The late Everett Rogers's (1995) exhaustive review of thousands of diffusion studies acknowledged the inspiration of Tarde; so does Kinnunen (1996). On the other hand, Stark's (1997) masterful study of the diffusion of early Christianity, for example, showed no awareness of the tradition on which it built.

Interpersonal Influence

Pondering the flow of influence in diffusion networks leads one to wonder whether Tarde's "imitation" is as far off as it sounds. Of course, much of social psychology is about interpersonal influence, where the word *imitation* hardly figures. Yet, there is good reason to think of imitation as one of the forms that influence may take. Ironically, a flaw in the design of the Decatur study made this clear. Recall that the Decatur interviewers were instructed to confirm alleged episodes of interpersonal influence by interviewing both parties to the transaction (i.e., both influencee and influential). Whenever one or the other failed to confirm his or her alleged role, the authors reported this failure, implicitly questioning whether influence had actually transpired. This protocol in the research design shut out the possibility that influence may occur without the knowledge of the influential, the influencee, or both. Consider fashion decisions, for example, where an influencee may imitate some piece of an influential's attire or behavior without the influential's knowledge. Indeed, social psychology is replete with examples of "identification" and other forms of following of which the "leader" may be unaware (e.g., Kelman, 1958, 1961; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

There is a fourfold table lurking in these thoughts.[3] Suppose that God knows that A has influenced B. But does A know that he or she has been influential? Is B aware that he or she has been influenced?

| Is B aware that he or she has been influenced? | A has influenced B | |
| | Is A aware that he or she has been influential? | |
	Yes	*No*
Yes	Persuasion command	Imitation
No	Manipulation	Contagion

The fruitfulness of this typology—hardly even referenced in *Personal Influence*—is (a) in giving an operational definition to different aspects of influence, (b) in showing that the language is smarter than we are in providing different names for these different influence types, and (c) in making clear that new methods are needed for the study of interpersonal influence inasmuch as one party to an influence transaction may be unaware of, or may deny, the role that he or she has actually played. Indeed, influence may have transpired even when *both* parties are unaware of their roles, as the table and the language make clear. We call this "contagion." So do epidemiologists. And students of collective behavior.

Public Opinion

Outside the laboratory, social research certainly has room for "imitation." Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1984), notably, has invoked Tarde explicitly in her assertion that people do not wish to be "alone" in their opinions, and while they may not jump onto the majority bandwagon, they will withdraw into silence and seeming conformity.[4] Tarde was interested in the manufacture of public opinion—not its product, but its process. He saw opinion arising, initially, from the "conversation" between an individual and his or her newspaper, and then further refined in the fellowship of the coffee house or salon, and then gradually merging into one or two "public opinions." Lord Bryce (DeFleur, 1988) added the smoking car of commuter trains to these sites of opinion exchange and consolidation. What distinguished Tarde from other theorists was his interest in the *aggregation* of opinion. He did not solve this puzzle, but at least he recognized it as something different from foot in the door opinion polling.

Public Space

It was in his later work that Tarde (in Clark, 1969, pp. 277–294) moved from trickle-down imitation to greater mutuality of influence, and from crowd to public. For Tarde, the public constituted a group that rallies round a shared identity and an issue—much like a crowd. But whereas a heterogeneous crowd arises from momentary and single-minded interaction around some event, the public is a more homogeneous, more contemplative product of a press that creates a union of readers around issues that are "sublimated around issues and passions . . . and not around interests" (in Clark, 1969, p. 285). While he was fascinated by the idea of

newspaper readers imagining their fellow readers reacting as they do, he allowed for their coming together for sociability around their "common information and enthusiasms." In other words, Tarde credited the press for creating "the age of the public" and—differing from LeBon—putting an end to the age of the crowd.

Unlike Habermas (1989), Tarde was not explicitly concerned with the workings of a deliberative democracy. Yet, like Habermas—but 50 years earlier—Tarde analyzed the system of interacting components that define "public space." The system consists of (a) press, (b) conversation, (c) opinion, and (d) action. To the press, he assigned the role of creating a public—even, like Anderson (1983), the role of creating a nation.[5] The press, then, sets an agenda for the conversation of the cafes. Opinions are clarified and crystallized in these conversations, and then translated into actions in the world of politics, fashion, consumer behavior, and so forth. At the collective level, these public opinions—reincorporated into the press—constitute a "brake on government."

Tarde's deliberative democracy—though unintended, so to speak—fits Habermas pretty well. Unlike Habermas, however, Tarde's ostensibly purposeless conversations were not necessarily political, although politics was one of their major latent functions. To enter Habermas's public space, one has to divest oneself of status, power, and identity and come equipped only with reasonableness and a commitment to the commonweal. Tarde's public space is much more casual and only incidentally occupied with problem solving, even though this is one of its consequences. It is tempting to say that for Habermas, reason (which we all possess, potentially) is a prerequisite to conversation; for Tarde, reason is better thought of as a product of conversation, in the sense that participants in Tardean conversation emerge with more considered opinions than the ones with which they entered. But, however tantalizing this sounds, it is probably better to argue that the two men came to similar conclusions (Kim, 1997).

Following this model of public space, Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999) attempted to test the propositions that (a) frequency of media use increases frequency of conversation, (b) conversation leads to more "considered opinion," and (c) holders of more considered opinions are more active in the political process. Unfortunately constrained by a one-time survey, we tried these hypotheses, nevertheless, on a random sample of American adults. Findings suggested that all three hypotheses hold, even if we encountered considerable difficulty in finding a satisfactory measure of "considered opinion," one that could be shown to result from political talk. Consistency, for example, did not seem to follow from conversation. The best of our measures—the one that best reflected the product of conversation—was a respondent's knowledgeability of opinions that go counter to his or her own. As far as we could tell, Tarde did well on this empirical test.

In conclusion, canonic texts are classics that have persisted in their relevance, not only because they engender consensus but because they are still worth arguing over. Scientists are wary of canonizing texts for fear that they will stunt further growth. But we can show, I believe, that the loss of classic texts is the greater danger—at least in social science.[6]

So what are "forgotten classics"? These are once-famous texts that have been superseded or discredited or have fallen out of fashion. Why, then, are they rediscovered? And how? Extrapolating from the present case—that is, from the essay on "Opinion and Conversation"—it takes a mentor or a critic or a well-wisher to point out to a prospective

colleague that he or she is walking in the footsteps of, or standing on the shoulders of, an ancestor who might be worth rehabilitating. It helps to have a well-informed loyalist, like Terry Clark, to serve as a medium.[7] This works especially well when the newcomer and the forebear stand together on one side of the renewed outbreak of an argument. In the present case, the argument is over impersonal versus interpersonal influence—or, better, how to relate the two.[8]

Of course, "forgotten texts" also have a Rip Van Winkle function. They allow us to ask what, if anything, do we know now that is different or better?

Notes

1. Jaap van Ginneken (1992) includes a brilliant chapter on Tarde in his *Crowds, Psychology and Politics*. Its publication follows on the heels of a new French edition of *L'opinion et la foule*, with an introduction by Dominick Reynie (1989).

2. In addition to the large excerpts in Clark (1969), we have been working from a full translation by Ruth Morris, as yet unpublished, for which we owe thanks for financial support to Peter Clarke, former dean of the Annenberg School at the University of Southern California.

3. Only after submitting the present paper for publication did I become aware that this typology appeared in print in a paper by my former associate, Herbert Hamilton (1971), giving due credit. It is reproduced here by permission of the Oxford University Press. It also appears in Gabriel Weimann (1994, p. 53).

4. Moscovici (1985, p. 38) cites an important passage from Tarde granting that, ostensibly, "there is nothing more intoxicating than the sense of freedom, of the non-necessity of any submission to others. . . . [However] the truth is that for most men there is an irresistible sweetness inherent in obedience, credulity, and almost lover-like servility." Erich Fromm's (1941) *Escape from Freedom* echoes this assertion in discussing how the newly emancipated masses spurned their freedom to choose.

5. Tarde argued that the press created not only the public but the nation, and in this he was followed by Anderson. He believed that the press overthrew the king by displacing his coordinating functions, and by making one nation out of separate regions it achieved majority rule in the parliament. These points are discussed in Katz (1998).

6. See Katz et al. (2004) for discussions of canonization in communications research, especially the paper by Illouz (2004).

7. In their study of longevity of the reputations of artists, Lang and Lang (1990) discuss the advantages of having an advocate.

8. Mutz (1998) despairs of the salience of interpersonal influence in the political arena and believes that the media provide a better answer. Schudson (1997) despairs of both.

References

Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and nature of*

nationalism. London: Verso.

Berelson, B., Lazarsfeld, P. F., & McPhee, W. N. (1954). *Voting: A study of opinion formation in a presidential campaign*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bryce, J. (1888). *The American commonwealth* (Rev. 2nd ed.). New York: Macmillan.

Burt, R. (1987). Social contagion and innovation, cohesion vs. structural equivalence *American Journal of Sociology, 92*, 1287–1335.

Clark, T. N. (Ed.). (1969). *Gabriel Tarde on communication and social influence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Coleman, J. S., Katz, E., & Menzel, H. (1966). *Medical innovation: A diffusion study*. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.

Crain, R., Katz, E., & Rosenthal, D. (1969). *The politics of community conflict: The fluoridation decision*. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.

Crane, D. (1999). Diffusion models and fashion: A reassessment. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 566*, 13–24.

Crane, D. (2000). *Fashion and its social agendas: Class, gender and identity in clothing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

DeFleur, M. H. (1998). James Bryce's 19th century theory of public opinion in the contemporary age of new communication technologies. *Mass Communication & Society, 1*, 63–84.

Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from freedom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology, 78*, 1360–1380.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hamilton, H. (1971). Dimensions of self-designated opinion leadership and their correlates. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 35*, 266–274.

Illouz, E. (2004). Whose idols—Lowenthal and the communications canon. In E. Katz, J. Peters, T. Liebes, & A. Orloff (Eds.), *Canonic texts in media research* (pp. 90–103). Cambridge, England: Polity Press.

Katz, E. (1998). Mass media and participatory democracy. In T. Inoguchi et al. (Eds.), *The changing nature of democracy* (pp. 87–100). Tokyo: United Nations University Press.

Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. (1955). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Katz, E., Docter, S., Gusek, J., Metzger, M., O'Connell, J., & Stokes, J. (1998). Press-conversationopinion-action: Gabriel Tarde's public sphere. In J. Lautman & B. Lecuyer (Eds.), *Paul Lazarsfeld 1901–1976*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Katz, E., Peters, J. D., Liebes, T., & Orloff, A. (2004). *Canonic texts in media research: Are there any? Should there be? How about these?* Cambridge, England: Polity Press.

Kelman, H. C. (1958). Three processes of opinion change: Compliance, identification, and internalization. *Journal of Conflict Resolution, 2*, 51–60.

Kelman, H. C. (1961). Processes of opinion change. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 25*, 57–78.

Kim, J. (1997). On the interactions of news media, interpersonal communication, opinion formation, and participation: Deliberative democracy and the public sphere. Unpublishe doctoral dissertation, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania.

Kim, J., Wyatt, R., & Katz, E. (1999). News, talk, opinion, participation: The part played by conversation in deliberative democracy. *Political Communication, 16*, 361–386.

Kinnunen, J. (1996). Gabriel Tarde as a founding father of innovation diffusion research. *Acta Sociologica, 39*, 431–441.

Lang, G., & Lang, K. (1990). *Etched in memory: The building and survival of artistic reputation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1944). *The people's choice*. New York: Duell, Sloan, & Pearce.

Lukes, S. (1972). *Emile Durkheim: His life and work*. New York: Harper.

Moscovici, S. (1985). *The age of the crowd: A historical treatise on mass psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mutz, D. C. (1998). *Impersonal influence: How perceptions of mass collectives affect political attitudes*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1984). *The spiral of silence: Public opinion—Our social skin*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Petty, R., & Cacioppo, J. (1986). *Communication and persuasion: The central and peripheral routes to attitude change*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Rogers, E. (1995). *Diffusion of innovations* (4th ed.). New York: Free Press.

Schudson, M. (1997). Why conversation is not the soul of democracy. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 14*, 297–309.

Simmel, G. (1904/1957). Fashion. *American Journal of Sociology, 62*, 547–558.

Sorokin, P. A. (1928). *Contemporary sociological theories: Through the first quarter of the twentieth century*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Sorokin, P. A. (1941). *Social and cultural mobility*. New York: Free Press.

Stark, R. (1997). *The rise of Christianity: How the obscure, marginal Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the Western world in a few centuries*. New York: HarperCollins.

Tarde, G. (1903). *The laws of imitation* (E., Parsons, Trans.; French ed., 1880). New York: Henry Holt.

Tarde, G. (1898/1989). *L'opinion et la foule*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Van Ginneken, J. (1992). *Crowds, psychology and politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Watts, D. (2003). *Six degrees: The science of a connected age*. New York: Norton.

Weimann, G. (1994). *The influentials*. Albany: SUNY Press.