


The Debate

 Friday 14th March, 6pm
 McCrum Lecture Theatre, Corpus Christi

"Do you recall the discussion between Durkheim and my father, at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes Sociales? Before they had even said a word, one sensed by their faces, their looks, their gestures, the distance that lay between these two men. One knew that such a discussion was sheer madness."
 Guillaume De Tarde

Introductory notes

A momentous debate concerning the nature of sociology and its relation to other sciences took place between Gabriel Tarde and Emile Durkheim at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes Sociales* in 1903. Unfortunately the only available record of the event is a brief overview which English readers may find in Terry Clark's 1969 edited volume *On communication and social influence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

The present recension of the debate, therefore, is based on a script consisting of quotations from the published works of Gabriel Tarde and Emile Durkheim, arranged to form a dialogue. It will be acted out, in French, by Bruno Latour (Gabriel Tarde), Bruno Karsenti (Emile Durkheim), and Simon Schaffer (The Dean), under the direction of Frédérique Ait-Touati. An English translation of the script, with references to the works from which extracts are drawn, is provided here to help the audience follow the debate.

The debate will last for approximately one hour and be followed by a discussion with the audience.

Acknowledgements: The French text is the work of Eduardo Viana Vargas, Bruno Latour, Bruno Karsenti and Frédérique Ait-Touati. The dean's text was written by Louise Salmon. All text save that in square brackets consists of quotations from published works by Emile Durkheim and Gabriel Tarde. English translation by Amaleena Damle and Matei Candea.



The Dean, Mr Alfred Croiset

[Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Directors, Emile Boutroux and Emile Duclaux, and the Secretary General, Dick May, I am delighted to welcome you to the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes Sociales*, at our premises of 16 rue de la Sorbonne.

Founded exactly three years ago, in November 1900, as an institute for the teaching of social sciences, the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes Sociales* aims to study the highly complex ensemble of questions that are most markedly and directly social. Not being in the least hostile to theory, it is nonetheless primarily concerned with the concrete, and with an engagement with the issues of our time.

Last July, the 10th International Sociology Congress was dedicated to the 'Relations between psychology and sociology'. Following on from this theme, we have chosen to dedicate a series of conferences to the 'Relations between sociology and other social sciences and auxiliary disciplines' in the compass of the Sociology course at the Ecole Sociale for the academic year 1903-4.

A fledgling discipline, sociology has a definite impact on the apprehension of current social questions. Two eminent colleagues will speak for this discipline today. They will define it and demonstrate its specificity, exposing the methods that they deem pertinent to this discipline within the context of a contradictory discussion.

It is, then, as President of the Board of Directors and President of the Teaching Committee at the Ecole de Morale et de Pédagogie, that I have the honour to introduce:

To my right, Mr. Gabriel Tarde, Professor at the Collège de France, Chair of Modern Philosophy, a member of the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques* since 1901, but also a board member of our Ecole, and member of the Teaching Committee at the *Ecole de Morale et de Pédagogie*. He is the author of the celebrated *Laws of Imitation* and has recently published a work entitled *Economic Psychology*.

To my left, Mr. Emile Durkheim, Deputy Chair of Educational Science at the *Faculté des Lettres* of the *Université de Paris* since 1902, he has published the highly acclaimed *Rules of Sociological Method* and is the founder of *Année sociologique*, the journal that reviews the year's international sociology production.

Gentlemen, I yield the floor to you, beginning with the younger. Mr Durkheim, let us begin with a definition of your conception of sociology in relation to the other sciences.]

Durkheim

Sociology has recently become fashionable. The word, which was little known and almost disparaged ten years ago, has entered into everyday use. Increasing numbers discover a calling for it, and the general public seems well-disposed towards the new science. Much is expected of it.

And yet, we must admit that the results it has yielded so far are rather less than one might expect given the wealth of publications, and the interest with which they are received. [...] This is because, in most cases, sociology is not asking a specific question. It has not yet gone beyond the age of philosophical constructions and syntheses. Instead of taking up the task of casting light on a restricted portion of the social field, it prefers a dazzling generality where every question is reviewed, and none is specifically addressed. This method may indeed amuse the public's curiosity by giving, as they say, illuminations on all sorts of subjects, but it can hardly produce anything objective. [...] A newborn science is entitled to err and fumble, as long as it is aware of its errors and fumbblings in such a way as to prevent their recurrence. Sociology should not therefore renounce any of its ambitions; but on the other hand, if it wishes to live up to the hopes which have been built up around it, it must strive to become more than an eccentric kind of philosophical literature. [...] The sociologist, instead of basking in the glow of philosophical meditations about social things, should take as the object of his research a clearly delimited group of facts, which one can, as it were, point to, of which one can say clearly where they begin and where they end, and to these he should firmly hold on! Let him carefully interrogate the auxiliary disciplines – history, ethnography, statistics – without which sociology is impotent! [...] If he proceeds in this way, even though his factual inventories may be incomplete and his formulas too narrow, he will have accomplished a useful task which the future can continue. [PSui, 1897]

The Dean

[Mr. Tarde, it is now your turn to clarify the object of sociology in relation to other sciences.]

Tarde

It is natural for an emerging science to depend upon those sciences that are already constituted, sociology for example upon biology. It is also natural for a developing science to seek to fly the nest and attempt to establish its own separate domain. The burgeoning field of sociology is precisely at this juncture, it seeks

to constitute itself *by itself* and *for itself*. This is a kind of egoism, a scientific individualism, useful to a certain extent as is any other egoism, be it animal or human, but harmful to the individual himself beyond a certain measure. [...] The sterility of such pretensions is well known; they misrecognise the solidarity of the various sciences and consequently the profound unity of universal reality. In the case of sociology too, we should beware the expenditure of such vain efforts; and I believe I perceive here and there the symptoms of such a distraction, which could be disastrous. Let us try to prevent it: let us seek out, with all the necessary precision, but without claiming an absolute autonomy for our dear science, the boundaries of the field that is properly hers to clear and cultivate. [...] What is or rather what are social facts, the elementary social acts, and what is their distinctive character? [...] The elementary social fact is the communication or the modification of a state of consciousness by the action of one human being upon another. [...] Not everything that members of a society do is sociological. [...] To breathe, digest, blink one's eyes, move one's legs automatically, look absently at the scenery or cry out inadvertently, there is nothing social about such acts. [...] But to talk to someone, pray to an idol, weave a piece of clothing, cut down a tree, stab an enemy, sculpt a piece of stone, those are social acts, for it is only the social man who would act in this way; without the example of the other men he has voluntarily or involuntarily copied since the cradle, he would not act thus. The common characteristic of social acts, indeed, is to be imitative. [...] Here is, then, a character that is clear-cut, and what is more, objective. [...] And I am amazed to have been reproached for focusing, in this definition, on the externally graspable fact without any regard to its internal source, and this reproach addressed to me – by whom? By [my distinguished colleague] Mr. Durkheim, who himself professes precisely the necessity of founding sociology upon purely objective considerations and of exorcizing this science, so to speak, by chasing psychology out of it – psychology which, it is claimed, is not its soul as has been believed until now by all its founders, from Auguste Comte to Spencer, but on the contrary its evil genius. [DES, 1895: 63-66]

The Dean

[I believe we have the disagreement clearly articulated: Mr. Durkheim would you like to elaborate on your thoughts?]

Durkheim

Mr. Tarde claims that sociology will arrive at this or that result; but we cannot say what the elementary social act is in our current state of knowledge. There are too many things we do not know and the construction of the elementary social fact can only be arbitrary under these conditions. [SSS, 1903: 164]

Tarde

It is not necessary for sciences to be definitively constituted in order to formulate laws. Research must proceed according to a guiding idea. And, in point of fact, the social sciences have not owed their progress to certain rules of objective method; they have achieved it by tending towards [...] the social microscopy that is intermental psychology. [SSS, 1903: 164]

Durkheim

Whatever the value of this intermental psychology, it is unacceptable for it to exercise a sort of guiding action on the specific disciplines of which it should in fact be the product. [SSS, 1903: 164] A purely psychological explanation of social facts cannot [...] fail to miss completely all that is specific, i.e. social, about them. [RMS, 1894: 131] [T]here is between psychology and sociology the same break in continuity as there is between biology and the physical and chemical sciences. Consequently, every time a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may rest assured that the explanation is false. [RMS, 1894: 129]

Tarde

And yet, for all his objections and unbeknownst to himself, the importance of repetition – [that is to say] of imitation once again – impinges upon [Mr. Durkheim]. In order to prove the radical separation, the absolute duality in nature that he claims to establish between the collective fact and the individual facts

which, in my view, constitute it, but, according to him, refract it from the outside (we know not how), he writes [I quote] “Some of these ways of acting and thinking acquire, as a result of repetition, a sort of consistency that precipitates them, so to speak, and isolates them from the particular events in which they are one day embodied.” [...] And the proof of this is – listen to this – that *collective habit*, or custom, [I quote once again] “expresses itself once and for all in a formula *which is repeated from person to person, which is transmitted by education*, which becomes fixed through writing” [end of quotation]. Without the preoccupation that blinds him, [my opponent] would see the obvious, namely that he has just involuntarily provided fresh proof of the eminently social or rather *socialising* character of imitative repetition. [...] Mr. Durkheim seems to gravitate towards some sort of theory of emanation. For him, I repeat, the individual facts that we call social are not the elements of a social fact, they are only the manifestation of it. As for the social fact, it is itself the superior model, the Platonic Idea, the model... and thus the idea of imitation in social matters, imposes itself even on its greatest adversaries. But let's move on... [DES, 1895: 67-69]

Durkheim

Terms [...] must be taken in a strict sense. Collective tendencies have an existence of their own; they are forces as real as cosmic forces, albeit of another sort; they too affect the individual from without, albeit through other channels. The proof that the reality of collective tendencies is no less than that of cosmic forces, is that this reality is demonstrated in the same way, namely by the uniformity of effects. [...] Since, therefore, moral acts [...] are reproduced with [great] uniformity [...], we must likewise admit that they depend on forces external to individuals. Only, since these forces must be of a moral order and since, except for individual man, there is no other moral being in the world but society, they must be social. But whatever we choose to call them, the important thing is to recognize their reality and conceive of them as a totality of forces which cause us to act from without, like the physico-chemical forces to which we react. So truly are they things *sui generis* and not mere verbal entities that they may be measured, their relative sizes compared, as is done with the intensity of electric currents or luminous foci. [...] Of course, this offends common sense. But science has encountered incredulity whenever it has revealed to men the existence of a previously unknown force. Since the system of accepted ideas must be modified to make room for the new order of things and to establish new concepts, men's minds resist through mere laziness. Yet we have to be clear. If there is such a thing as sociology, it can only be the study of a world hitherto unknown, different from those explored by the other sciences. This world is nothing if not a system of realities. [Suicide: 309-10, Sui, 1897: 348-9]

Tarde

At first glance, one cannot make sense of this; but once initiated into the doctrine of the author, here is what it means: it is not the more or less of generalisation, of imitative propagation of a fact, which constitutes its more or less social character; it is the more or less of *coercivity* — Indeed, according to [my opponent], for by this point we have merely uncovered the half of his thought, the definition of the social fact is double. One of its characters, as we know, is [again I quote, that it] “exists independently of its individual expressions”. But there is another character, no less important, which is to be coercive. [DES, 1895: 70]

The Dean

[You then both clearly disagree on the question of knowing how appropriate it is to autonomise the specific facts that sociology is concerned with but also on the question of their exteriority and, in sum, on the strength with which this world imposes upon us.]

Durkheim

We must delineate, in a precise fashion, the exact field of sociology. It embraces one single, well defined group of phenomena. A social fact is identifiable through the power of external coercion which it exerts or is capable of exerting upon individuals. The presence of this power is in turn recognisable because of the existence of some pre-determined sanction, or through the resistance that the fact opposes to any individual action that may threaten it. However, [I grant you that] it can also be defined by ascertaining how widespread it is within the group, provided that, as noted above, one is careful to add a second

essential characteristic; this is, that it exists independently of the particular forms that it may assume in the process of spreading itself within the group. [...] moreover, this second definition is simply another formulation of the first one: if a mode of behaviour existing outside of the consciousnesses of individuals becomes general, it can only do so by exerting pressure upon them. [RMS, 1894: 56-57] That is what social phenomena are when stripped of all extraneous elements. As regards their private manifestations, these do indeed have something social about them since in part they reproduce the collective model. But to a large extent each one depends also upon the psychical and organic constitution of the individual, and on the particular circumstances in which he is placed. Therefore they are not phenomena which are in the strict sense sociological. They depend on both domains at the same time, and one could [if you so wish,] call them socio-psychical [RMS, 1894: 55-56].

Tarde

By this definition, nothing would be more social than the relationship established between victors and vanquished through the invasion of a stronghold or the fall into slavery of a conquered nation; nor would anything be less social than the spontaneous conversion of a whole population to a new religion or a new political faith preached by enthusiastic apostles! The mistake here is so noticeable to my mind that one is forced to wonder how it could have been born and taken root in such a powerful intelligence. [Mr. Durkheim] tells us: [...] given that the social fact is essentially external to the individual, "it cannot infiltrate the individual without imposing itself". I fail to see the validity of this inference. Food is also external to us before being absorbed. Is that to say that swallowing and assimilation are the constraints exercised by food upon the cell that appropriates it? That is not even true of the birds we force-feed in our barnyards, which certainly prefer to be force-fed than to die of hunger. [DES, 1895: 71]

Durkheim

[Mr Tarde's] proposition is purely arbitrary. [He] may of course state that in his personal opinion nothing real exists in society but what comes from the individual, but proofs supporting this statement are lacking and discussion is therefore impossible. It would be only too easy to oppose to this the contrary feeling of a great many persons, who conceive of society not as the form spontaneously assumed by individual nature as it blooms outwards, but as an antagonistic force restricting individual natures and resisted by them! [Suicide : 311, Sui, 1897 : 351]

Tarde

There follows, according to [you], that it is not permissible to describe as social those individual acts where the social fact manifests itself, for example, the words of an orator (a manifestation of language), or the genuflections of a devotee (a manifestation of religion). No, as each of these acts depends not only on the nature of the social fact, but furthermore on the mental and vital constitution of the agent and the physical environment, these acts are types of hybrids, *socio-psychical* or *socio-physical* facts, with which it is important no longer to tarnish the scientific purity of the new sociology. [DES, 1895: 69-70]

Durkheim

Undoubtedly, this state of dissociation [between the social and the individual] does not always present itself with equal distinctiveness. It is sufficient for dissociation to exist unquestionably in [...] numerous important instances [...], for us to prove that the social fact exists separately from its individual effects. Moreover, even when the dissociation is not immediately observable, it can often be made so with the help of certain methodological devices. Indeed it is essential to embark on such procedures if one wishes to refine out the social fact from any amalgam and so observe it in its pure state. Thus certain currents of opinion, whose intensity varies according to the time and country in which they occur, impel us, for example, towards marriage or suicide, towards higher or lower birth-rates, etc. Such currents are plainly social facts. At first sight, they seem inseparable from the forms they assume in individual cases. But statistics afford us a means of isolating them. [RMS, 1894: 55]

Tarde

[Oh!], if [...] one depends upon statistics as an essentially 'objective' source of information, one is deluding oneself. The oracles of this sibyl are often ambiguous and in need of interpretation. In truth, official statistics function as yet too imperfectly and have functioned for too short a time to bring any conclusive factors to the debate that concerns us. [CSS, 1895 : 154] [I know this all the better since it is I, Mr. Durkheim, who provided you, at your request, with the statistics of the office I led and which have contributed to your opus on suicide....].

Durkheim

Social facts] are [...] not inaccurately represented by rates of births, marriages and suicides, that is, by the result obtained after dividing the average annual total of births, marriages and voluntary homicides by the number of persons of an age to marry, produce children, or commit suicide. Since each one of these statistics includes without distinction all individual cases, the individual circumstances which may have played some part in producing the phenomenon cancel each other out and consequently do not contribute to determining the nature of the phenomenon. What it expresses is a certain state of the collective mind. [RMS, 1894: 55]

Tarde

This amounts to recognizing, in terms of social links, only the relation of master to subject, of teacher to student, without any regard to the free relations between equals. And it is to purposefully ignore the obvious: that, in schools themselves, the education that children give one another freely by imitating each other, [...] brings them much that is more important than that which they receive and submit to by force. Such an error can only be explained by linking it to this other one, that a social fact, qua social, *exists outside all its individual manifestations*. Unfortunately, by thus objectifying and pushing to the limit the distinction, or rather the absolutely subjective separation, of the collective phenomenon and the particular acts of which it is composed, Mr. Durkheim casts us back into plain scholasticism. Sociology does not mean ontology. I own that I have great difficulty in understanding how it could be that, "the individuals subtracted, Society remains". [...] Are we going to return to the *realism* of the Middle Ages? I wonder what advantage one gains, under the pretext of refining sociology, by emptying it of all its psychological and living content. One seems to be searching for a *social principle* where psychology does not enter at all, created expressly for the science one is fabricating, and which seems to me even more chimerical than the former *vital principle*. [L&S, 1895 : 61-62]

The Dean

[We have, then, two particularly clear-cut disagreements on the autonomy of sociology, on its power of coercion, and since we are speaking of realism, it seems to me we are touching upon the great question of the relationship between the parts and the whole.]

Durkheim

Because society is only composed of individuals, it appears to common sense that social life can have no other substratum than individual consciousness; otherwise it appears to be up in the air, floating in empty space. Yet, what is so easily deemed inadmissible with regard to social facts, is commonly admitted for other reigns of nature. Every time elements, whatever they are, combine together and release, by the very fact of their combination, new phenomena, it must be understood that these phenomena are situated, not in the elements, but in the whole formed by their union. The living cell contains nothing other than mineral particles, just as society contains nothing other than individuals; and yet, it is evidently impossible for the phenomena characteristic of life to reside in atoms of hydrogen, oxygen, carbon and nitrogen. [...] Life is in the whole, not in the parts. [...] Let us apply this principle to sociology. If, as has been conceded, this synthesis *sui generis* that constitutes every society releases new phenomena, different to those that occur in solitary consciousnesses, it must be admitted that these specific facts reside in the very society that produces them, and not in its parts, that is to say in its members. [RMS2p, 1901 : xvi]

Tarde

[Yes, I agree:] When we consider one of the greater social phenomena, such as a grammar, a code, or a theology, [it is true that] the individual mind appears so trivial a thing beside these monumental works that the idea of regarding it as the sole artisan concerned in the erection of these enormous cathedrals seems to some sociologists quite absurd; and one may [indeed] be readily excused if, without perceiving that one thereby abandons all attempt at explanation, one is drawn into saying that these works are eminently impersonal; there is but a step from this position to that of my illustrious opponent, [you,] Mr. Durkheim, who [insist] that they are not functions of the individual, but his factors, and that they have an existence independent of human personality, and rule man with despotic might, by the oppressive shadow which they cast over him. But how have these social realities come into being? (I say realities, for, although I oppose the idea of a social organism, I am far from challenging the concept of certain social realities, concerning which some understanding must be reached.) I see clearly that, once formed, they impose themselves upon the individual, sometimes, though rarely, with constraint, oftener by persuasion or suggestion or the curious pleasure that we experience, from childhood up, in saturating ourselves with the examples of our myriad surrounding models, as the babe in imbibing its mother's milk. This I see clearly enough; but how were these wonderful monuments constructed, and by whom, if not by men and through human efforts? [LS, 1898 : 124-125]

Durkheim

It is due to the thoroughly engrained habit of applying to sociological matters the forms of philosophical thought that [our] preliminary definition has often been seen as a sort of philosophy of the social fact. It has been said that we explained social phenomena through constraint, just as, [you,] Mr. Tarde, explain them through imitation. We had no such ambition and it didn't even cross our mind that this might have been attributed to us, it being so contrary to all method. What we were proposing was not to anticipate the conclusions of science by means of a philosophical view, but simply to indicate by which external signs it is possible to recognize the facts that should be dealt with, in order that the scientist may find them where they are and not confuse them with others. The aim was to delimit the field of enquiry as much as possible, not to flounder about in some exhaustive intuition. Thus we very willingly accept the reproach that this definition does not express all the characters of the social fact, and consequently, that it is not the only one possible. There is, indeed, nothing inconceivable about the social fact being characterised in many different ways; for there is no reason that it should only have one distinctive property. All that matters is choosing the property which seems most appropriate for one's purpose. It is indeed quite possible to employ several criteria concurrently, according to the circumstances. And we ourselves have felt this to be occasionally necessary in sociology; for there are cases where the character of constraint is not easily recognizable. All that is required, since we are concerned with an initial definition, is that the characteristics employed are immediately discernable and can be recognized before research. Other definitions have sometimes been opposed to ours, but it is precisely this condition which they do not fulfil. [RMS2p, 1901 : xx]

Tarde

Unfortunately this hypothesis is entirely at odds with experience [*l'observation*]. Here in sociology we have, a rare privilege, intimate knowledge both of the element, which is our individual consciousness, and of the compound, which is the sum [*assemblée*] of consciousnesses; here, no one can make us mistake words for things. And what we clearly see in this case, is that if the individual is subtracted nothing remains of the social, and that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, in society, which does not exist, in a state of division and continual repetition, in living beings, or that did not exist in the dead individuals who came before them. [...] [Besides,] what is there at the very heart of the chemical molecule, of the living cell? We do not know. How, then, not knowing this, can we state that, when these mysterious beings encounter each other in some way, itself unknown, and make new phenomena appear before our eyes, an organism, a brain, a consciousness, there has been, at each step taken on this mystical ladder, a sudden apparition, creation *ex nihilo* of something that previously did not exist, even as a germ? Is it not likely that, if we knew these cells intimately, these molecules, these atoms, these unknown elements of the great problem, so often taken as givens, we would find it very simple to exclude the phenomena which seem to be created by their combination, these phenomena which now amaze us? Notice the enormous assumption implied by the

current notions that Mr. Durkheim explicitly relies on to justify his chimerical conception; this assumption is that the mere relation between several beings can become itself a new being, often superior to the others. It is strange [it is strange!] to see minds that pride themselves on being above all positive, methodical, minds that hound and harry even the shadow of mysticism, being attached to such a fantastical notion. [DES, 1895 : 75-76]

Durkheim

A thought which is to be found in the consciousness of each individual and a movement which is repeated by all individuals are not for this reason social facts. These are so far from being constituted by repetition, that they exist outwith their individual incarnations. What constitutes a social fact is a belief, tendency or practice of the group taken collectively, which is something else entirely than the form it may assume when it is refracted through individuals. [RMS, 1894 : 54]

Tarde

How could it be refracted before existing, and how could it exist, let us speak intelligibly, outside of all individuals? The truth is that a social thing, whatever it might be [...] devolves and passes on, not from the *social group collectively to the individual*, but rather from one individual [...] to another individual, and that, in the passage of one mind into another mind, it is refracted. The sum of these refractions, from the initial impulse of an inventor, a discoverer, an innovator or modifier, whoever it might be, unknown or illustrious, is the entire reality of a social thing at a given moment; a reality which is constantly changing, just like any other reality, through imperceptible nuances; this does not prevent a collectivity from emerging out of these individual varieties, an almost unchanging [*constante*] collectivity, which immediately strikes the eye and gives rise to Mr. Durkheim's ontological illusion. For it is, beyond the shadow of a doubt, a veritable scholastic ontology that the learned writer is attempting to insert into sociology, in place of the psychology he battles with. [DES, 1895 : 66-67]

Durkheim

My proposition could only be opposed by agreeing that a whole is qualitatively identical with the sum of its parts, that an effect is qualitatively reducible to the sum of its productive causes; which amounts to denying all change or to making it inexplicable. Someone has, however, gone so far as to uphold this extreme thesis, but only two truly extraordinary reasons have been found for its defence. First, it has been said that [here I am quoting you, my distinguished colleague] "in sociology we have, a rare privilege, intimate knowledge both of the element, which is our individual consciousness, and of the compound, which is the sum of consciousnesses"; secondly, that through this double introspection [and you have just reiterated this] "we clearly ascertain that if the individual is subtracted nothing remains of the social." [Suicide : 311, Sui, 1897 : 350-351]

The Dean

[I believe we have now understood what separates you and it seems useless to go any further down this track: you will not reach an agreement. But it seems to me that Mr. Durkheim should respond to this serious accusation of 'mysticism'. The word seems rather strong, does it not? Might this be due to the manner in which you each understand the role of contingency?]

Durkheim

For Mr. Tarde [...] all social facts are the production of individual inventions, propagated by imitation. Any belief and any practice, would have at its origin an original idea, born of an individual brain. Every day, millions of inventions of this nature would occur. But while most would perish, a few would succeed; they are adopted by other members of society, be it because they seem useful to them, or because their author is invested with a singular authority transmitted to everything he produces. Once generalised, the invention ceases to be an individual phenomenon to become a collective phenomenon. – Well, there is no science of inventions, such as Mr. Tarde conceives them; for they are only possible thanks to inventors, and the inventor, the genius, is "the ultimate accident", a pure product of chance. [SFxiX5, 1900 : 131]

Tarde

[Conversely] Mr. Durkheim spares us such terrible tableaux. With him, no wars, no massacres, no brutal invasions. Reading him, it seems that the river of progress has flowed smoothly over a mossy bed undisturbed by froth or somersaults. [...] Evidently, he inclines towards a Neptunian, rather than a Vulcanian, view of history: everywhere he sees sedimentary formations, nowhere igneous upheavals. He leaves no place for the accidental, the irrational, this grimacing face at the heart of things, not even for the accident of genius. [QS, 1893 : 187]

Durkheim

Certainly, once a genius is postulated, then one can very well look for the causes that favour the mental connections in him, whence new ideas are produced, and here is probably what Mr. Tarde call the *laws of invention*. But the essential factor in any innovation is the genius himself, it is his creative nature, and this is the product of entirely fortuitous causes. Furthermore, since the mysterious source of the “social river” is in him, accident is thus placed at the root of social phenomena. There is no absolute necessity to this belief or that institution appearing at this or that historical moment, in this or that social setting. According to whether chance allows the innovator to be born sooner or later, the same idea might take centuries to sprout or might bloom straight away. Therefore there is an entire category of inventions which might follow each other in whatever sequence: they are those that don’t contradict one another, but are, on the contrary, helpful to each another. [...] Thus, the notion of law, which Comte had finally [and laboriously!] succeeded in introducing into the sphere of social phenomena, a notion that his successors strove to clarify and to consolidate, is here obscured, veiled[, trampled underfoot]. Whim and caprice, once they are placed in the heart of things, are thereby permitted to seep into thought also. [SFxixS, 1900 : 132]

Tarde

[I quote you once more] “*The determining cause of a social fact should be sought amongst the antecedent social facts and not amongst individual states of consciousness.*” Let us apply this: the determining cause of our railway networks should be sought neither in the states of consciousness of Papin, Watt, Stephenson and others, nor in the logical series of conceptions and discoveries which have illuminated *[qui ont lui à]* these great minds, but rather in the road networks and mailcoach services of yesteryear. [...] There is a fetish, a *deus ex machina*, that the new sociologists make use of, like an *Open Sesame*, every time they are embarrassed, and it is time to point out this abuse which is becoming truly worrying. This explanatory talisman is the *milieu*. [Ah!] Reach for that word – what more needs to be said? The *milieu* is the multi-purpose formula whose illusory profundity serves to disguise the emptiness of the idea. Thus, they have not hesitated to tell us, for example, that the origin of all social evolution should be sought exclusively in the properties “of the internal social milieu.” [...] As for this phantom-milieu, this ghost we delight in summoning up, to which we lend all sorts of marvellous virtues, so that we are exempt from recognizing the existence of the true and truly beneficial geniuses by whom we live, in whom we move, without whom we would be nothing, let us eliminate it from our science as soon as possible. The milieu is a nebula which, upon closer inspection, resolves into different stars, of very unequal sizes. [DES, 1895 : 78-79]

The Dean

[But then, if I understand you both correctly, you disagree not only on the role of innovation and genius in history, but also on the very question of what a science should be?]

Durkheim

Tarde’s theory appears to be the very negation of science. [EAESF, 1895 : 86-87] It places, indeed, the irrational and the miraculous at the foundation of life and, consequently, of social science. If we adopt Tarde’s point of view, we see that social facts are the result, more often than not, of simply mechanical causes, unintelligible and foreign to any finality since there is nothing more blind than imitation. [EAESF, 1895 : 85] Here, indeterminacy is made into a principle. Consequently, this is no longer science. It is not

even the methodical philosophy that Comte had tried to institute; it is a very particular mode of speculation, somewhere in between philosophy and literature, in which a few very general theoretical ideas are trailed around through all possible problems. [PF/SSS, 1903 : 479]

Tarde

This is not an appeal to mystery, but rather to the profound and under-appreciated ability to affirm a beyond to the horizon of facts and not to misjudge, at least, what one cannot know. If to affirm the unknown is to use our ignorance, to deny the unknown is to be ignorant twice over. [Pos, 1910 : 41] [I will say, however, that] Mr. Durkheim’s principal idea [...] rests on a pure conception of his mind that he has wrongly taken for a suggestion of facts. It only presents, in any case, a highly partial and relative truth, very insufficient as a single foundation or principle of a sociological theory. [...] One may well, then, be amazed at the confidence it inspires in Mr. Durkheim and at the virtue he attributes to it in leading us necessarily to a higher or more human Morality and Justice. [QS, 1893 : 189]

Durkheim

As Mr. Tarde says [...], the origin of our argument is elsewhere. It stems above all from the fact that I believe in science whereas Mr. Tarde does not. For how can one believe in science who reduces it to an intellectual game, capable at best of informing us about what is possible and impossible, but incapable of serving in the positive regulation of behaviour? If it has no other practical use, it is not worth the effort. And if one hopes in this way to disarm one’s recent adversaries, one is strangely mistaken; in reality, one returns their weapons to them. Undoubtedly, science by this definition would no longer be able to disappoint the expectations of men; but only because men would no longer expect very much from it. It will no longer be exposed to accusations of bankruptcy; but only because it will have been declared minor and incapable in perpetuity. I cannot see what either we or it stand to gain by this. For what is thus placed above reason is sensation, instinct, passion, all the base and obscure parts of ourselves. Let us indeed make use of these when we cannot do otherwise. But when one sees in them something other than a stopgap that little by little must surrender its place to science, when one attributes to these things a pre-eminence of some kind, then, although one may not be openly speaking of the revelations of Faith, one is a more or less consequent theoretical mystic. And mysticism is the reign of anarchy in the practical sphere, because it is the reign of fantasy in the intellectual sphere. [CSS, 1895 : 523]

Tarde

It is by asking of science something beyond what it can give, it is by giving it rights that exceed its already quite vast range, that one has given rise to belief in its alleged failure. Science has never failed to keep her true promises, but a great many counterfeit bills marked with her counterfeit signature have been circulated in her name, that she now finds impossible to redeem. It is pointless to add to their number. [CSS, 1895 : 162]

Durkheim

Faced with the results which the comparative history of institutions has already produced, there can no longer be any question of purely and simply denying the possibility of a scientific study of societies; furthermore, Mr. Tarde himself means to create a sociology. Only, he conceives it in such a manner that it ceases to be a true science, in order to become a very particular form of speculation where imagination plays the dominant role, where thought is not considered to have a duty to the regular obligations of proof or to the ascertaining of facts. [SFxixS, 1900 : 130-131]

Tarde

Mr. Durkheim believes he is honouring science by making it a sovereign over the will, by giving it the power not only to point out the most pertinent means by which the will may achieve its overarching goal, but even to dictate the direction of this North star of conduct. [CSS, 1895 : 161-162] If I had to formulate a maxim on this subject, it would address the moral as well as the intellectual conditions which the discovery of truth places upon us. A little modesty and simplicity behaves an adolescent science, just like a

young man on the cusp of life; it should refrain from a doctrinal tone and from scholarly jargon. One should approach it with a benevolent and informal cast of mind, and also, and above all, with a vibrant and joyful love of the subject. [...] The first requirement for being a sociologist is to love social life, to sympathize with men of every race and every country brought together around one hearth, to research with curiosity, to discover with delight what tender devotions may be hidden in the hut of the reputedly most ferocious savage, sometimes even in the lair of the criminal; finally, never to believe readily in the stupidity, in the absolute viciousness of man in the past, nor in his present perversity, and never to despair of his future. [DES, 1895 : 94]

Durkheim

Mr. Tarde is confusing [...] different questions, and [I] refuse to comment on a problem he has not broached as yet and that has nothing to do with this discussion. [SSS, 1903 : 165]

The Dean

[I think we can stop there. I remind you that this contradictory debate between our eminent colleagues served as an introduction to the sociology course at the Ecole des hautes études sociales, during the course of which students will have numerous chances to discuss these presuppositions. I think now is the moment to give our heartfelt thanks to both speakers.]

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