

Building Sociological Skills: Online Skills Companion

## **GABRIEL TARDE AND THE END OF SOCIAL** *By Bruno Latour*



### **GABRIEL TARDE (1843-1904)**

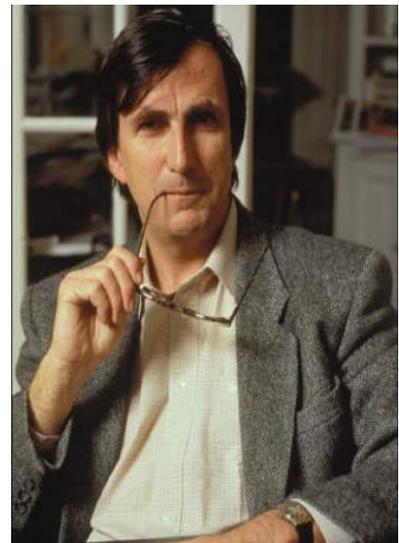
French sociologist, criminologist and social psychologist, who conceived sociology as based on small psychological interactions among individuals, of which the fundamental forces being imitation and innovation in society.

Tarde work highlights a number of ways in which they can be adapted in terms of the methods in contemporary sociology as a model for scholars to use as the foundation to their own theories.

### **BRUNO LATOUR (1947)**

French sociologist of science and anthropologist. He is professor and vice-president for research at the Institut d'études politiques de Paris (2007), where he is associated with the Centre de sociologie des organisations (CSO).

In a series of books published, Latour has been exploring the consequences of science studies on different traditional topics of the social sciences.



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**THE ESSAY:**

**The essay is about the work of Tarde's social question from the book *Monadologie et Sociologie* and his ideas regarding the discipline of social theory.**

**Latour puts forward the argument that this was a precursor to the Actor Network Theory thus wanting to make Tarde its founding father of the whole concept.**

**THE PURPOSE:**

**To become familiar with Gabriel Tarde's Metaphysical Social Theory.**

**THE AIM:**

**Bruno Latour was to argue that 'The End of Social' has a link to the 'Actor Network Theory'.**

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**THE TWO THEORIES:**

**The Metaphysical Social Theory (MST)**

- (a) that nature/society divide is irrelevant for understanding the world of human interactions.**
  
- (b) at the micro/macro distinction stifles any attempt to understand how society is generated.**

**Actor Network Theory (ANT)**

- (a) is a framework and systematic way to consider the infrastructure surrounding the social order of society.**
  
- (b) it assigns an agency to both human and non-human actors.**

**THE THEORETICAL APPROACH:**

**Metaphysical Social Theory (MST)**

**Tarde says that: *“all things are society, and any phenomenon is a social fact.”***

**Actor Network Theory (ANT)**

**Latour says: *“is an attempt to terminate the use of the word ‘social’ and to replace it with the word ‘association’.”***

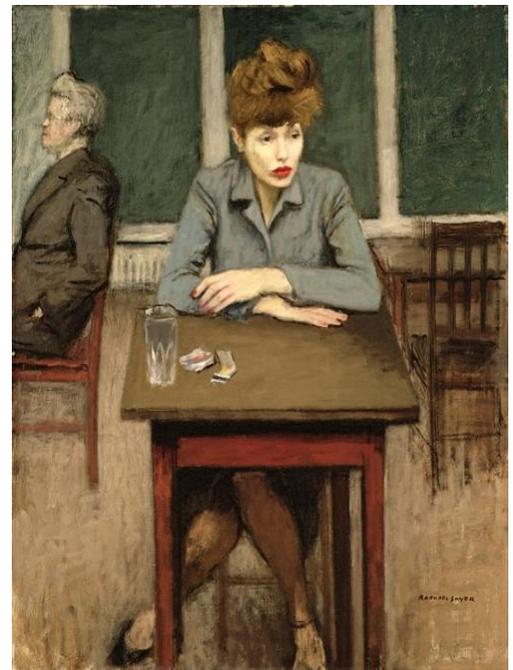
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## THE CORE CONCEPTS:

**MONADS:** In the MST definition it denotes that humans are monads, that is, everything that has an individual action started in the secrecy and solitary function of the brain, and from this raw material it spreads out to all other cultivated brains and actions.

### FOR EXAMPLE:

In this image it shows two humans, in a social setting, artefacts around them. Both humans are lost in their own thoughts, solitary. They are monads. However, the artist has clearly depicted them as actors, that have taken shape by the virtue of them being in the same place, and their interactions in this scene means they are networking with the viewer of the artwork, which is also an artefact, hence they are all Actants.



Title: Cafe Scene (oil on canvas)  
Artist: Soyer, Raphael (1899-1987)  
Location: Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, USA

**ACTANTS:** In the ANT definition, it denotes human and artefacts as actors and therefore assumes actants to be in a network, which has took shape just by the virtue of their relation or interactions to each other at certain times.

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## THE LINK BETWEEN THE TWO THEORIES:

Tarde says:

*“The individual human agent is itself composed of myriad ‘little persons’, and are actively promoting one’s total version of the world.”*

Latour says:

*“Agency plus influence and imitation is exactly what has been called, albeit with different words, an actor network.”*

## CRITICAL SUMMARY

### STRONG POINTS THAT LATOUR MAKES:

He puts forward just three main points to consider:

- ✚ The macro is nothing but a slight extension of the micro.
- ✚ Science studies as the test-bed of social theory.
- ✚ The bifurcation of Nature.

### WEAK POINTS THAT LATOUR MAKES:

- ✚ This difference between the two theories of MST and ANT isn’t mentioned in detail nor clearly by Latour.
- ✚ Contrary to what Latour wanted in championing Tarde, why mention Durkheim in the first instance who disagreed and had no relevance. Hence Latour weakens his argument.

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## **BAD POINTS ON THE ESSAY:**

- ✚ Latour treats the subject with such flippancy. As in his use of the term 'pet theory' as a way to describe and ridicule his own social theory of the ANT concept out of arrogance.**
- ✚ Latour regards Tarde's as a 'marginalized orphan' which he is then dismissive with Tarde's MST concept, after his vain attempt to explain its concept succinctly, which he fails dramatically.**
- ✚ For it's evident that in this essay Latour's main aim, was to state, that if anyone reading Tarde's work thinks the Metaphysics of Social Theory was too abstract, then by this 'tradition' his Actor Network Theory will also be difficult to understand. He supposes.**

## **GOOD POINTS ON THE ESSAY:**

- ✚ He brings to the readers attention a radical idea of an empirical material which hasn't been critically analysed in any depth. Thus presents an overview of one of Tarde's social theories.**
- ✚ Latour does want to bring about a theoretical debate about the MST and ANT connection as a contribution of a social theory by citing reference to Tarde's, which he considers as important in this field of academic study.**

### References:

Appendix 3, TMA05 2009J, pp.48-61, DD308 Making Social World, The Open University.