



Christopher Kullenberg, Karl Palmås

Contagiontology

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Panopticism is waning; panspectrocinism is the nascent social diagram that organizes our lives. Heineken and Wal-Mart use pattern recognition and computer-assisted predictions of future behaviours to secure their markets. Google, the panspectric corporation par excellence, tells us that the company wants to know what you'll want to do tomorrow. This brings renewed poignancy to Gabriel Tarde's contagion-centric thought, write Kullenberg and Palmås.

Tarde's contagiontology: From ant hills to panspectric surveillance technologies

A hundred years ago, Gabriel de Tarde argued in favour of an epidemiological conception of society. However, his points of departure were not very successful. The modern bio-political states were unable to find proper use for his style of reasoning, partly because Tarde argued against ascribing social processes any pre-defined logics and categories, and partly for the lack of instruments of quantification and statistics. Even though quantification may not be necessary for sociology, it has become attractive for governing hierarchical and stratified societies.

Instead the twentieth century became Durkheimian, since his demarcation between social and natural facts rendered a domain of knowledge which was measurable and quantifiable, while simultaneously securing solutions to the bio-political goals of modern states.

Tarde had no intentions of demarcating the disciplinary boundaries of the sciences, but rather drew on the fact that they shared basic similarities in



their search for repetition (Tarde 1899/2000:8). He called this “universal repetition” (Tarde 1903:1ff). Repetitions were to be found in the reproductive patterns of micro-organisms, as well as in the social organisation of ant hills, and in human linguistic, emotional and behavioural expressions. However, repetitions only exist as potential variations. No repetition is ever fully identical with the “original”, but is always a displacement and a variation. This resonates with Gilles Deleuze, who explicitly refers back to Tarde (Deleuze 1994:26, Deleuze & Guattari 2005:219).

A key question then becomes how to understand conformity in language, morals, actions, genetic patterns, economy and politics. Tarde explains this with the concept of *imitative rays*, meaning that any specific innovation – for example the pronunciation of a word or behavioural patterns for standing in line – may radiate and create resonances by being repeated by many humans or other species, over and over again. Social change and innovation thus always has a point of departure, but may only form a general plane of consistency by being repeated. A riot in a factory or in the streets, for example, would only turn into a revolution if they were repeated instantly in other factories or cities. This way, Tarde’s micro-sociology, is sharply contrasted to theories pre-supposing a general consciousness (Marx), a norm-system (Durkheim), or principles of organisation (Weber). However, this does not necessarily lead to a denial of friction or impeding effects upon repetitions. Tarde solves this problem by stating that repetitions always exist in a multiplicity of other repetitions, thus in a state of constant competition (Tarde 1903:17). Moreover, in deleuzeoguattarian terminology, he stresses the primacy of molecular intensities over the striations of molar aggregates and statistical reduction of complexity.

The intensive potential for politics thus always lies in the domains of micro-politics, and revolutionary potential is derived from the ability of the intensities to infect other humans, thus being repeated, in order to change society. True political change can never occur on the level of collective representations, a domain usually referred to when talking “politics” (Deleuze & Guattari 2005:240). From Deleuze & Guattari’s perspective, the prime mover of social change are the molecular intensities. Then the general consciousness producing for example the dialectics of the bourgeoisie to the proletariat, or the conserving powers of norm-systems in a society, are in fact apolitical since they are merely aggregate phenomenon. In order to understand them, and change them, we need to concentrate on the



processes of repetitions and imitations constantly being produced in heterogeneous constellations; in workplaces, in homes, and in central social institutions. Affects are always immanent to concrete and specific situations.

Guattari's conception of molecular revolutions (Guattari 1984) resembles Tarde's analysis. However, Tarde stresses the potentially contagious resonances inherent to imitations: "but we do have epidemics of luxury, of lotteries, of stock-speculation, of gigantic railroad undertakings, as well as epidemics of Hegelianism, Darwinism etc." (Tarde 1903:146, footnote 3).

Moreover, Tarde had a keen interest in state of the art communications media, such as telegraphs, railroads and books, and their role in shaping the germination of thoughts, actions, and ideas throughout societies. However, he faced an ever-present dilemma since there were no methods readily available for empirical research programmes in order to quantify his theories. A hundred years later, Bruno Latour picked up on this problem.

The massive digitalization of many types of documents may offer Tarde a belated vindication. The poor statistics available at the end of the nineteenth century could not validate his requirement for a point-to-point 'epidemiology'. It's interesting to think that the possibility of a Tardian quantitative sociology might be opened now. We now have the quasi-quantitative tools allowing us to follow in the same fashion, rumours, opinions, facts, and fantasies. (Latour 2005:208)

What Latour is referring to has, at least to a certain extent, been achieved by intelligence agencies around the world. The mythical ECHELON-system, which was debated extensively during the 1990s, has already started to apply these kinds of quasi-quantitative studies.

What we see is thus an epistemological paradigm shift, traceable through Tarde's vision of sociology. In the book *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (1991), Manuel DeLanda describes this type of surveillance. One of his key points is the demarcation between the emerging Panspectron of the NSA, in contrast to the Panopticon of Jeremy Bentham:

There are many differences between the Panopticon and the Panspectron [...] Instead of positioning some human bodies around a



central sensor, a multiplicity of sensors is deployed around all bodies: its antenna farms, spy satellites and cable-traffic intercepts feed into its computers all the information that can be gathered. This is then processed through a series of “filters” or key-word watch lists. The Panspectron does not merely select certain bodies and certain (visual) data about them. Rather, it compiles information about all at the same time, using computers to select the segments of data relevant to its surveillance tasks. (DeLanda 1991:206)

A similar system came to be debated widely in Sweden during the summer of 2008 as the FRA (National Defence Radio Establishment) were permitted to copy all traffic data from the Internet in order to execute surveillance activities. The central mode of operation for the NSA and the FRA surveillance emerges from the combined utilization of monitoring and storing data about human behaviour and affects rendered knowledgeable by recent innovations in data mining and pattern recognition. Thus, the notion of a panspectric surveillance may lead us into rethinking the present.

The panspectric diagram may be understood (similarly to the panoptic diagram) along the lines of its effectuation in concrete assemblages. Both diagrams consist of paradigmatic sets of technologies, architectures and material components. We may compare the panopticism’s optically visible regimes in prisons, schools and factories to the general architectures of panspectroicism. These consist of technologies that register human behaviour (via the digital footprints that we generate through mobile phones, computers, RFID chips, etc.), as well as technologies of pattern recognition, which enable predictions of future behaviour. Also, both diagrams (Deleuze 1999) contain expressive components: panoptic assemblages produce enunciations, as described by Foucault, on prisoners, pupils and workers; the panspectric assemblages activate less stable “dividual” enunciations on the various modes of human behaviour. Note, for example, the recent interest in Social Network Analysis (SNA), and the so-called “turn to affects” within the social sciences and humanities.

The Tardian contagionology should be understood in this context. In a world where increasing aspects of our daily lives are recorded by computers, mobile phones and credit cards, we must critically ask under what circumstances these forms of control are taking place.

Panspectric organisation: Contagions and rhizomatic manoeuvres

Is it possible to place these modes of surveillance in the context of Tarde's contagionology? How does the panopticon and the panspectron relate to the control of biological and cultural contagions?

Tarde developed his epidemiological theory at a time when scholars in the field of social medicine were exploring the logic of contagions (Foucault 2000). The interest in understanding – and stopping – contagions can be traced back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In his analysis of the spread of panoptic surveillance, Foucault highlights this very interest. The naval hospital is one of several examples that highlight how panoptic principles of organisation manage contagions:

A port, and a military port, is – with its circulation of goods, men signed up willingly or by force, sailors embarking and disembarking, diseases and epidemics – a place of desertion, smuggling, contagion: it is a crossroads for dangerous mixtures, a meeting-place for forbidden circulations. The naval hospital must therefore treat, but in order to do this it must be a filter, a mechanism that pins down and partitions; it must provide a hold over this whole mobile, swarming mass, by dissipating the confusion of illegality and evil. The medical supervision of diseases and contagions is inseparable from a whole series of other controls [...] Hence the need to distribute and partition off space in a rigorous manner. (Foucault 1977: 144)

This contagionological perspective is helpful when distinguishing panopticism from panspectrocinism. In both these social diagrams, the process of contagion is construed as an object of knowledge and control. However, whereas the former endeavoured to *stop* and *contain* contagions, the latter – as we shall see – has the twin aims of *injecting* and *monitoring/predicting* contagions. We have already hinted that the NSA and the FRA construct their predictions on the basis of something that resembles a Tardian contagionology. The panspectric diagram assumes that your future behaviour can be predicted through the examination of the imitative rays that you are exposed to. (In this way, we, the Tarde-reading social scientists and humanities scholars, form a constitutive part in this nascent



diagram.)

Intelligence services were the first institutions to leverage the “massive digitalisation” as a means to predict thought contagions among citizens. Thus, the panspectric diagram has military origins, and as such it follows the same pattern as panopticism: having been a logic to mitigate a certain situation of crisis, it is evolving into a generic means with which to organise the world.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the panspectric diagram is at its most visible within the world of business. Corporations such as Wal-Mart are developing advanced capabilities to predict future patterns of consumption, using it to streamline its logistics. However, the panspectric corporation *par excellence* is Google, whose mission statement tells us that the company wants to know what you’ll want to do tomorrow.

The connection between Tarde and the panspectric practices of contemporary business has already been noted by Andrew Barry and Nigel Thrift, who claim that the modern consumer economies “are based on tracking and periodically initiating consumer enthusiasms” (Barry & Thrift 2007:519). The Tardian research programme is finally implemented, though not by social scientists, but by large corporations (ibid 521).

One example of this phenomenon is the “viral” marketing that has become increasingly popular in recent years. In Jakob Wenzler’s doctoral dissertation, he describes “The Green Room Sessions”; an event-based marketing concept that infiltrates the indie music scene in Gothenburg. None (or at least few) members of the scene are aware of the fact that the whole event is instigated by Heineken. The green-hued event – no vulgar Heineken logos, of course – at the Röda Sten arts centre is a tactical manoeuvre. The anti-market institution is thus attempting to inject a contagious event germ in the rhizomatic channels of communication within the indie scene:

The indie information machine conducts its nomadic action through hacking the architecture and infrastructures of the city; Heineken conducts a similar nomadic action through hacking the indie information machine. (Wenzler 2007:163)

The Green Room Sessions concept, however, is not solely “about” the



events themselves. Most of all, it is a vehicle for logging preferences and desires. Wenzler writes about how he, in order to get his invite to the Röda Sten event, uploads information about himself – his likes and dislikes – to the Green Room Sessions website:

The code words that I have entered are relating to the indie format – they are the mechanisms of selection which, if they were to find the correct perceptor, would invoke the associated indie desire. (Wenzler 2007:162)

The Heineken case displays two aspects of how the panspectric diagram relates to contagions. On the one hand, the rhizomatic manoeuvre (Naveh 2006) serves to inject contagion into a flow. On the other hand, the database that stores the contagious affects of the indie scene makes it possible for the corporation to monitor contagions of consumption. Thus, the company gains a capacity to predict – and potentially release – future desires. Heineken does not operate on the basis of the parameters of “individual-mass” (as in the case of Foucault’s disciplinary societies), but on the basis of “bank-dividual”, as described in Deleuze’s postscript on the societies of control (Deleuze 1995). Thus, the “individual” has become fragmented – we are no longer surveilled as unitary subjects, but as “dividuals” whose electronic footprints can be found in a quilt of overlapping “data banks”.

Kopimi, love, and the unexpected

Another way of tracing how replicators find their way through naturecultures (Haraway 1991) is through the concept of “kopimi”. This has a double meaning – it is partly “an imperative”, but also “a way of life, animated by the desire to copy and to be copied” (Fleischer 2008). Rasmus Fleischer’s aesthetic vitalism is in perfect resonance with Tarde, for whom every innovation is waiting for an instance in which it can copy itself by the millions.

A summer hit, a dance move, a *ritornello* – all such entities possess a capacity to be copied, and are themselves copies of other replicators. The imitation, the copy, is nevertheless always an inexact one. Barry and Thrift emphasize that for Tarde, the imitation always contains “a potential surplus”, which allows “an event or an action to deviate into invention” (Barry & Thrift 2007:517). These kinds of *clinamen* are prevalent in remix



cultures – from early hip hop to more contemporary mash-ups – in which mutations and processes of a parallel evolution are generating ever new compositions. Fertile remix cultures emerge at the threshold where the speed of mutation eclipses the copyright holders' capabilities to stop the contagion. One may, then, argue that the record industry has – thus far – resorted to panoptic measures to curtail file sharing.

There are however actors who have opted for panspectric means of ordering – note how Last.fm create meta-data based on user preferences. Some individual copyright holders have also started to accept the imperatives of kopimi. One such example can be found in the fan fiction scene that Otto von Busch writes about in his doctoral dissertation (2008). Film-maker George Lucas has developed a method of governing the wild proliferation of copies and remakes generated by Star Wars fans. Instead of trying to stop this contagion, Lucas has created a film festival that honours “good” fan fiction. Conversely, “slash fiction” – the fiction genre that permits Han Solo to finally do the deed with Luke Skywalker – is excluded from the festival. In this way, Lucas can – at the population level (DeLanda 2002:56-62) – exert a certain level of statistical control over the ecologies of Star Wars desire.

The “copy me!” imperative is not only to be understood in ethical terms. It is at least as important to understand it in ontological terms. This does not mean that we humans are without emotion in relation to the imitation – quite the contrary:

There is nothing more natural than that those who love each other should copy each other, or, rather, as this phenomenon always begins by being one-sided, that the lover should copy the beloved. (Tarde 1903:215)

In a wider sense, copying can effectuate affects between individuals, groups and societies. Consider the rich ties that are created among Star Wars fans who collectively imitate and displace the Darth Vader character, or – for that matter – the affects generated by the thought contagions of Jesus and Marx.

It might even be here, in environments of promiscuous and rapidly mutating contagions, that we can approach the question of how political collectivities emerge? What roles can kopimism play in Guattari's molecular revolutions, or in the materially and politically informed notion of love that Hardt and



Negri have called for?

In this contagionology of ours, we need to become more astute in distinguishing promiscuous and rapidly mutating contagions from controlling and dogmatic ones. In the panspectric social diagram, politics is related to the eventuality of the unexpected. In a time when intelligence agencies and corporations are becoming increasingly capable of predicting and approximating the future, it is the unexpected contagion that opens political possibilities. But this is not enough. We must also remember that Tarde's imitations not only bring good things to life, but also generates hierarchical power structures: "And it is precisely because the human acts which are imitated have this dogmatic or commanding character that imitation is a social tie, for it is either dogma or power which binds men together." (Tarde 1903:xvi)

Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari would later ask their readers not to place too much hope in a simplistic tearing-down of hierarchies (strata). When they write about the war machine and smooth spaces, they invariably point out that there is no inherent good in processes of deterritorialisation. Whether such processes generate lines of flight, or cause a "demented or suicidal collapse" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005:160) - in other words, fascism, as they define it - is a question that has to be examined thoroughly on a case-by-case basis. "We cannot say that one of these three lines [the fear of losing the binary machines that define us, the clarity of molecular micro-perceptions, segmentary power] is bad and another good, by nature or necessity. The study of the dangers of each line is the object of pragmatics or schizoanalysis, to the extent that it undertakes not to represent, interpret, or symbolize, but only to make maps and draw lines, marking their mixtures as well as their distinctions." (Deleuze & Guattari 2005:160)

A contagionology can potentially help us in drawing these maps. Instead of ascribing societal processes a certain *a priori*-defined ideology or structure, we can now trace the effect of certain singularities on one or several contagions. By studying how these contagions generated subjectivities and affects, we may attain that which Deleuze and Guattari call for. The contagionology can become a tool that we - not only the NSA and FRA - can use. It might even help us manage the vacuum that Deleuze (1995) writes about in his postscript: If power has dispersed, critique and resistance must also align itself with the panspectric diagram.

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