

Follow the phlegm: Tracing the infinitesimal in male networks of power

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in the work of Gabriel Tarde. Arguably, the theories he proposed – and methodologies he imagined – constitute a radical break with established theories of the ontology of social structures.

Taking its cue from this promise, this paper studies the logics that underpin the emergence of a particular male-dominated network of power (*gubbslem* in Swedish). Using a large data set from back-slapping patterns in the blogosphere coupled with ethnographic data, the text aims to show how the “becoming” of this network emanates from a myriad of infinitesimal processes, which cannot be reduced to being mere results of a certain social milieu.

Following a general introduction to the project, section two and three will outline the theory and method proposed by Gabriel Tarde some hundred years ago. Here, the presentation will roughly follow Bruno Latour in his recent endeavour to align Tarde with contemporary sociology. Section four will discuss the method, and section five the results, of the research in question. The paper is concluded with some notes on the practical uses of this body of theory, and on the operationalisation of similar projects in the future.

Keywords

Gabriel Tarde, interference, resonance, actor-network theory, homosociality, blogosphere, qualitative method, social network analysis, SoNIA, Technorati, surveillance, panspectrocinism.

1. Introduction

A couple of years ago, I relocated to my native Sweden for some post-doctoral work. Having completed my research degree in the UK, my new academic setting was for me a veritable *terra incognita*; a blank slate in terms of collaborators. Over time, a network of academic friends did indeed emerge. As my faculty peers had other theoretical interests, and as senior members of staff tend to focus on their own proteges, these associations were constructed after hours, with extra-faculty academics. [1]

Over time, the composition of this academic network has caused worry to its members. We are, it seems, heading down the slippery slope of becoming a professional network predominantly consisting of men, or – to borrow a Swedish term – *gubbslem*. The term, which translates as “old man slime” or “geezer phlegm”, is used to denote agglomerations of back-slapping, mutually supporting, and – ultimately – powerful men. [2]

The frustration with being *gubbslem*-in-the-making is two-fold: First, our generation should know better. The politics of gender and sexuality are instrumental in our understanding of the political – some of us are even teaching within the field. [3]

Secondly, this frustration also relates to the ways in issues of gender are discussed today – not so much within academia, but in more popular cultural debates. In the past ten years, the analysis and politics of gender has been synonymous with the deconstruction of cultural expressions, the revealing of hidden structures, the debunking of underlying ideologies. While these techniques may have started out as subtle ways of analysing literature, they are increasingly proving to be blunt instruments with which to describe – and influence – the making and unmaking of the world. [4]

These twin frustrations compelled me to turn this experience into a social experiment. Drawing on the social theory of Gabriel Tarde (2000), recently advocated by Bruno Latour (2005), I started to examine how this *gubbslem*-in-the-making can be traced, using the panspectric data generated by information technologies. In adherence with the Actor-Network Theory imperative to “follow the actor”, I set out to follow the phlegm. [5]

2. Tarde's theory of the social

In *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour argues that sociology “could have been an even more relevant discipline”, had it only “inherited more from Tarde” (Latour, 2005: 14). The thrust of his argument is that Gabriel Tarde's social theory is an antidote to the theories of the “sociologists of the social”. In particular, Tarde can lead sociologists away from the Durkheimian notion of a social *milieu*, emerging *ex nihilo* as a special domain of reality, separate from the individuals supposedly immersed in it. [6]

Indeed, in *Social Laws* (2000 {1899}), Tarde repeatedly states how his idea of society is the “exact opposite” of M. Durkheim, his one-time student:

Instead of explaining everything by the supposed supremacy of a law of evolution, which compels collective phenomena to reproduce and repeat themselves indefinitely in a certain order – instead of thus explaining lesser facts by greater, and the part by the whole – I explain collective resemblances of the whole by the massing together of minute elementary acts – the greater by the lesser and the

whole by the part. (Tarde, 2000: 35, cited in Latour, 2005: 15) [7]

Thus, Tarde's quarrel with Durkheim and his followers was not based on any rejection of aggregate-level patterns. There are, indeed, “collective resemblances” in society. Tarde did however reject the notion that

in order to see a gradual dawn of regularity, order, and logic in social phenomena, we must go outside of the details, which are essentially irregular, and rise high enough to obtain a panoramic view of the general effect. (75) [8]

Instead, Tarde wants sociology to be brought “down from the dizzy heights of grand but vague causes, to real and precise acts of infinitesimal size” (79). Instead of assuming the existence of a macro-level structure that acts upon individuals, sociologists ought to search for the origins of aggregate-level patterns among the minute elementary acts massed together. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explained this contrast in the following manner:

Durkheim's preferred objects of study were the great collective representations, which are generally binary, resonant, and overcoded. Tarde countered that collective representations presuppose exactly what needs explaining, namely, “the similarity of millions of people”. That is why Tarde was interested instead in the world of detail, or in the infinitesimal: the little imitations, oppositions, and inventions constituting an entire realm of subrepresentative matter. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988: 218) [9]

In this way, Tarde influenced the Deleuzoguattarian concepts of “the molar” and “the molecular” – the former associated with overcoding representations of society, the latter associated with “an entire realm of subrepresentative matter”. As in the case of the molar and the molecular – where the “distinction is not one of scale, but of mode of composition” (Massumi, 1992: 54) – Tarde posits that the Durkheimian collective representations capture only a fraction of the intense activity unfolding at the infinitesimal level. Latour writes:

The big (states, organizations, markets) is an amplification but also a *simplification* of the small. Only Tarde could reverse common sense that much in quietly stating that: 'So, too, there is generally more logic in a phrase than a discourse, and more in a single discourse than in a succession or group of discourses; there is more in one special rite than in a whole religion, in one point of law than in a whole legal code, in one particular scientific theory than in the whole body of science; and there is more in a single piece of work executed by one workman than in the sum total of his performances.' With this principle we should not consider that the macro encompasses the micro, but that the micro is made of a proliferation of incommensurable entities – what he calls 'monads' – which are simply lending one of their aspects, 'a facade of themselves', to make up the provisional whole. (Latour, 2005: 243) [10]

Thus, the “small” is not simply a passive placeholder in an overarching structure. Rather, the general patterns that emerge do so due to the fact that the small is “alive” in a multitude of ways – most of which not amenable to structural description. This idea animates the dictum – hinted in the Deleuze and Guattari quote – that structure is not to be seen as the explanatory factor, but as *that which is to be explained*. Instead of assuming that a supposed social *milieu* – a structure – produced a certain aggregate-level pattern, sociologists ought to study how such patterns can emerge through “real and precise acts of infinitesimal size”. [11]

For Tarde, the Durkheimian explanation of “the conformity of millions of men acting together under

certain relations” overlooks the great difficulty of

explaining how such a general assimilation could ever have taken place. But this question is solved, if we extend the analysis, as I have done, to the intercerebral relation of two minds, the one reflecting the other. (Tarde, 2000: 25) [12]

This “intercerebral” aspect is key to Tarde's account of society: The social is nothing but associated actors, whose behaviours emerge from imitation of other actors' behaviours. Behavioural patterns and subjectivities emerge through person-to-person “contagion”, as actors are “hit by” so-called “imitative rays”. In this way, Tarde turned sociology into a form of epidemiology, stating that

it is true, we are often governed by collective and impersonal models, which are usually not consciously chosen. But before we speak, think, or act as “they” speak, think, or act in our world, we begin by speaking, thinking, and acting as “he” or “she” does. And this he or she is always one of our own near acquaintances. Beneath the indefinite they, however carefully we search, we never find anything but a certain number of he's and she's which, as they have increased in number, have become mingled together and confused. (25) [13]

As hinted by the Deleuze and Guattari quote, the social not only encompasses imitation, but also invention. Imitative rays thus start as innovations, as “quanta of change” with “a life of their own” (Latour, 2005: 15). Each of these

tries to multiply itself by thousands and millions of copies in every place where there exists human beings and will never stop except if it is kept in check by some rival production as ambitious as itself. (Tarde, 1999: 96, cited in Latour, 2005: 15) [14]

Thus, imitative rays proliferate – causing actors to be subjected to a plethora of clashing rays. The “sum total” of these is what Tarde calls “imitative radiation”:

Our social life includes a thick network of radiations of this sort, with countless mutual interferences. (51) [15]

It is among these interferences between imitated behaviours – which Tarde likens to interference among sound waves (82) – that the sociologist can find the resonances that generate aggregate-level patterns. Resonance, in this case denotes a process that incorporates positive feedback loops (cf. Bonta & Protevi, 2004: 135), or, more specifically

a generic process which implies one or other form of *mutually stimulating couplings* [...] among heterogeneous elements, as well as the *amplification of original differences* (DeLanda, 2002: 205) [16]

Thus, associated actors “massed together”, allows subjectivities to emerge via the replication of a plethora of intersecting and resonating “psycho-genes” (Latour, 2005: 216). In other words, “intra-psychology” can be said to emerge from “inter-psychology” – individuality, subjectivity, and personhood can all be described as results of “memetic” circulation. [17]

As a metaphor for explaining subjectivity in this way, Latour has chosen the term “plug-in”:

What is so telling in this metaphor of the plug-in is that competence does not come in bulk any longer but literally in bits and bytes. You don't have to imagine a 'wholesale' human having intentionality, making rational calculations, feeling responsible for his sins, or agonizing over his

mortal soul. Rather, you realize that to obtain 'complete' human actors, you have to *compose* them out of many successive *layers*, each of which is empirically distinct from the next. (Latour, 2005: 207) [18]

This position is simply a re-statement of Actor-Network Theory's position of human agency – the network configures the actor. As Michel Callon has explained it, ANT

assumes the *radical indeterminacy* of the actor. For example, the actor's size, its psychological make-up, and the motivations behind its actions – none of these are predetermined. (Callon, 1999: 181-182) [19]

Nevertheless, the plug-in metaphor has also been used recently by Manuel DeLanda, in his Deleuze-inspired “assemblage theory” (DeLanda, 2006: 10). In both cases, the notion of the plug-in is invoked to describe how the subjectivity-yielding “memes” come together through “relations of exteriority”. Thus, DeLanda states that “the properties of the component parts can never explain the relations which constitute the whole” (11), and Latour similarly writes that “none of the plug-ins have the power to determine” (Latour, 2005: 214). [20]

More importantly, with reference to the idea of humans acting in a social life that includes a thick network of radiations, the capacities of an emergent whole (in this case a human subject)

do depend on a component's properties but cannot be reduced to them since they involve reference to the properties of other interacting entities. (DeLanda, 2006: 11) [21]

Thus, Tarde writes about instances where several contradictory imitative rays influence a human psyche.

In fact, every time any one of us hesitates between two modes of verbal expression, two ideas, two beliefs, or two modes of action, it means that an interference between two imitation-rays takes place in him (Tarde, 2000: 32) [22]

Given the countless mutual interferences generated by conflicting imitative rays, a new picture of subjectivity emerges: Layer upon layer of plug-ins are added to the subject, sometimes counteracting and sometimes reinforcing each other, causing both confusion and opening new forms of agency. As we shall see in the next section, new technologies are now allowing us to understand and map this process in greater detail. [23]

3. The computer-aided vindication of Tardian method

It is, in a way, fitting that Latour has chosen a word from the the world of computers to describe the subjectivities yielded by imitative radiation. Like many other spheres, sociology's outlook on the world is altered as the conceptual machines of computers are added to the conceptual machines of the motor and clockwork eras (von Busch & Palmås, 2006). [24]

Nevertheless, there is another computer-related aspect of Latour's recent interest in Tarde. It is, he writes in a footnote, not a coincidence that Tarde's social theory is now becoming popularised:

The massive digitalization of many types of documents may offer Tarde a belated vindication. The poor statistics available at the end of the 19th 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) [25]

In *Social Laws*, Tarde discusses beliefs and desires in quantitative terms – as already mentioned, the basic element of study is, after all, *quanta* of change that *multiplies* itself through imitation. Towards the end of the book, in a footnote, he argues that sociology should take its cue from Jean-Pierre Rousselot, a linguist who had studied the subtle differences in dialect in the French countryside.

If we wish to make sociology a truly experimental science and stamp it with the seal of absolute exactness, we must, I believe, generalize the method of Abbé Rousselot in its essential features, through the collaboration of a great number of trustworthy observers. Let twenty, thirty, or as many as fifty sociologists, from different sections of France or any other country, write out with the greatest care and in the greatest possible detail the succession of minute transformations in the political or industrial world, or some other sphere of life, which it is their privilege to observe in their native town or village, beginning with their own immediate surroundings. Instead of limiting themselves to vague generalities, let them note in full the specific instances of the rise or fall of religious or political faith, of morality or immorality, of luxury, comfort, and whatever modifications of political or religious belief have occurred under their eyes since they reached the age of reason, beginning with their own family and circle of friends. (Tarde, 2000: 92) [26]

This approach to research is, in many ways, a natural conclusion to draw from Tarde's theory. How else can the contagion of custom be monitored, unless the researcher focuses on actual micro-level person-to-person relations? It is, Tarde writes, metrics related to these relations

that the sociologist must adopt as his own peculiar data, just as the astronomer adopts the relation between two masses, the attracting and the attracted; it is here that he must seek the key to the social mystery; it is from this that he must endeavor to derive the few simple but universal laws, which may be distinguished amid the seeming chaos of history and human life. (26) [27]

Unfortunately for Tarde, it was (and still is) practically impossible to operationalise the huge endeavour of letting a large team of sociologists record all quanta of change as they multiply through the association of actors. Nevertheless, due to the rise of panspectric surveillance (cf. Palmås, 2008a), Tarde's program seems all the more plausible. Intensified universal modulation of everyday life – the transformation of “analog” behaviours to digital data – and the storing of this data in large banks enables researchers to let computers do the monitoring job for them. [28]

Thus, a new generation of Tardians can harness this nascent panspectric social diagram in order to trace associations, render social epidemics visible, and possibly detect some of the “universal laws” that create interferences. More generally, it can also convey a sense of Tarde's description of the social – to zoom in seamlessly from the simplified descriptions of aggregate-level patterns, to the monads crossed by clashing imitative rays, and back out again. [29]

At this juncture, such panspectric data is most readily accessible in the blogosphere. A large number of bloggers produces large sets of data, which in turn contains a large set of metadata. There is also a well-developed infrastructure which monitors, aggregates and stores this data. Moreover, the kinds of data generated by the blogosphere lends itself well to the “quasi-quantitative” (or “quali-quantitative”) approaches mentioned by Latour. Matters normally conceived as qualitative – cultures, emotions, power etc. – can be mapped and captured through mathematical analysis of suitable quanta. [30]

Substantial amounts of similar work has already been conducted within Social Network Analysis.

However, while this field is highly interesting, the focus of a computer-aided Tarde-inspired analysis may look somewhat different than most work within SNA. One way of approaching this difference would be via Deleuze and Guattari's (1988: 12-15) distinction between tracing and mapping. [31]

In the Deleuzoguattarian terminology, tracing entails efforts to reproduce the world, whereas mapping serves to create a conceptualisation of the world. Thus, SNA often endeavours to provide an accurate reproduction of a social network, focusing on layout algorithms and the measurement of “centrality” of nodes. A Tardian analysis would be more interested in visualising associations and the imitative rays that flow through such associations. [32]

Moreover, such an analysis would have to have the explicit aim of being simply a map, as any aggregate-level rendering of the social is a provisional whole generated by simply one particular aspect of monadal life. Conversely, due to the fact that it is impossible to capture *all* aspects of the imitative radiation, it is impossible to capture the full complexity of monadal activity. (This does not, however, mean that this complexity can be construed as quantum flows.) For the same reason, a Tardian analysis based on panspectric data is also likely to feature various forms of ethnographic data, especially at the monad level. [33]

It is, however, important to note that for Latour, “tracing” has a slightly different meaning. In Latour's world, the term leads us towards a redefinition of sociology – no longer a “science of the social”, it should be construed a “*tracing of associations*” (Latour, 2005: 5). Framed in this way, “social does not designate a thing among other thing”, but rather “a *type of connection* between things that are not themselves social”. [34]

In other words, the tracing of associations is a matter of detecting and representing traces left by the quantum flows that make up the social. The next section will outline how this task was achieved in this project. [35]

4. Finding traces of phlegm-in-the-making

The “follow the phlegm” project was instigated in response to text posted February 25 2008 on the blog *Mothugg*, maintained by a doctoral student in political science. The post featured a list of young academics who also maintained personal blogs, highlighting the predominance of males within the network. Three days later, in the informal setting of a pub, two of the academic bloggers listed in the blog post – a doctoral student in theory of science (*Intensifier*), and the author (*99, our 68*) – came up with the idea of visualising this gendered reality, aided by computer software. [36]

These events, at the outset of the project, capture at least two key aspects of the emergence of male professional networks. First, male networks are maintained through continuous actions that function as tokens of mutual affirmation, for instance through gestures of referencing. In the context of blogging, this is achieved through *linking*. Secondly, in the formation of male networks, informal settings, such as the pub or the sauna, plays a crucial role. Indeed, these aspects of homosociality have been charted through ethnography as well as literary criticism (cf. Sedgwick, 1985). [37]

Nevertheless, in previous studies of phlegm-in-the-making, these properties have been charted against the backdrop of the Durkheimian divide between agency and structure. Thus, ethnographies have explored singular sites of male clubbiness and singular instances of back-slapping. Conversely, other studies have been able to highlight the aggregate outcomes of these processes, through statistics on the predominance of males in various positions of power. As hinted above, the beauty of the blogosphere is

that the data set created allows the researcher to *seamlessly* zoom in and out of these structures, not having to choose between a view of the singular and a view of the aggregate. [38]

The blogosphere generates a raft of data and metadata, but one particular type of metadata useful for the purposes of this project is link data. On a practical level, it is easy to access, and usually well-formatted, available from web-based services such as Technorati. However, more importantly, link data does give the analyst a sense of *who affirms whom*. The process of linking is a cornerstone of the blogosphere; since it is not a traditional centralised broadcast, your presence as a blogger is heavily reliant upon other bloggers linking to your site. Not only does your number of readers increase if you are linked to – your ranking in web searches, and as a blogger (also provided by services such as Technorati), is also enhanced through linking. Thus, this online back-slapping is arguably as “filled with meaning” as offline references and word-of-mouth endorsements. [39]

This does not imply that a link to another blogger “means” the same thing all time. It can be a backslap (“well done”), an affirmation (“I see you”), a token of social status (“I know this person”), or a deliberate strategy (“I link this person in order for them to link back to me and improve my ranking”). Other times, linking may be less intentional than that. Nevertheless, to return to the Tarde-inspired approach sketched above, the link data *does* provide traces of associations; the data may even give analysts clues regarding the imitative ray(s) propagated in each particular linking instance. [40]

In this particular project, the focus is not so much on the *content* of the linked texts. In other words, it does not explore memes such as “Deleuzian social ontology” or “hacker culture”, as they proliferate through the blogs. Rather, from a gender perspective, the primary interest is the interrogation of the inter- and intra-psychological factors that cause males to link to other males. What imitative rays – what plug-ins – are in action when this happens? Since the analyst is unlikely to find clues about that in the set of data and metadata sourced from the blogosphere, s/he will have to use ethnographic method to survey the plug-ins in action at *each linking instance*. [41]

In this endeavour, the author's lack of distance to the phlegm studied is not only a liability: Latour has pointed out, in reference to Tarde, that “structure is function of distance” (Latour, 2008) – something to be observed from “dizzy heights”, by researchers who endeavours to step “outside of the details”. As mentioned above, Tarde's Rousselot-inspired vision of sociology as an “experimental science” demanded that researchers study their “immediate surroundings” – indeed “their own family and circle of friends”. [42]

Moving on to hands-on execution, the “follow the phlegm” project followed a four-step procedure: A first run of collating, visualising and publishing data on the linking patterns between and around the three blogs mentioned above; a second run of collating, visualising and publishing data on the linking patterns between and around twenty-five associated blogs; a small-scale ethnography of each linking instance between the three original blogs; and an exploration of the imitative rays set in motion by the project itself. The remainder of this section outlines the practicalities of this procedure. [43]

During the first step in the three-step process, an initial set of data was collated manually from the Technorati website. Thus, *all incoming links* to the three blogs – *Mothugg*, *Intensifier* and *99 our 68* – were copied to an OpenOffice.org spreadsheet. This initial data set featured 86 blogs and 207 links – 99 linking to *Mothugg*, 27 linking to *Intensifier*, and 81 linking to *99 our 68* – created during a time period of 460 days. In the spreadsheet, the data was manipulated so as to comply with the .son-file format developed for the open source software package SoNIA (Social Network Image Animator). Having created the [.son file](#) in a text editor, SoNIA was used to convert the link data into an [MP4-format](#)

[animation](#). [44]

The animation outlines how the three blogs form an ever-tighter core, as the three male bloggers repeatedly reference each other. The animation also depicted all other blogs that had referenced the original three, and highlighted the cluster of blogs that that formed around these three blogs. (SNA software achieves this end through various algorithms that “optimise” the layout of the network, forming an arrangement where nodes that have many ties are placed closely together, thus minimising the “energy” in the network.) [45]

It was hardly surprising to find that the three original blogs had formed a tight core – looking at the collated data, one could easily tell that each of the three bloggers got most of their links from the other two. (Moreover, the optimising algorithm will inevitably tend to centre the three blogs, as there are no incoming links to the other blogs.) However, this first animation served two purposes: First, it was [published on the author's blog](#), feeding the the gendered linking patterns around the site back to the readers. Thus, as will be discussed later in the text, the animation started acting in the world. Secondly, the cluster of bloggers around the three-blog core was used for snowball sampling in a second run of collating, visualising and publishing of linking data. [46]

The second run of animation was therefore based upon the data on incoming links to 25 blogs – the original three, plus 22 “second tier” of bloggers that been identified as frequent linkers in the first run of animation. However, a stratification criterion was also added to the sampling of these 22 blogs: In order to highlight the gendered dynamics of the linking patterns, more female bloggers had to be added to the set. Thus, special emphasis was put on including female bloggers in the analysis. However, even after the stratified sampling, only six of the 25 blogs were maintained by women. [47]

This second data set was considerably larger than the first one, featuring a total of 523 blogs and more than 1500 links created, over a period of 510 days. In order to collate this amount of data, the Technorati API was used – more specifically the “Cosmos” query, which returns an XML file that includes different types of meta data related to all incoming links to a particular blog. From this XML file, the relevant data was retrieved, in the form of an HTML-based table, using an XSL stylesheet. Each table, representing incoming links to one of the 25 blogs, was then transferred to an OpenOffice.org spreadsheet. From hereon, the procedure was identical to that of the first run of animation, described above: A [second SoNIA animation](#) was created from a [.son file](#), and [published on the author's blog](#). [48]

In this larger data set, there are a sampling-related limitations to the analysis. Aside from the stratification of the snowball sampling, the data is somewhat skewed due to technical issues related to access. The Technorati API Cosmos query only returns up to 100 links to a particular blog. This implies that certain very popular (ie. often linked) blogs are only represented by their 100 most recent links. This did, however, only occur in the case of three of the 22 blogs added in the second run. Moreover, the purpose of this second round was primarily to verify that the “phlegm” of the original three blogs actually do constitute a core, and secondly to situate this phlegm in relation to other link ecologies in the blogosphere. Again, as mentioned above with reference to Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, the animation is a map and not a tracing. [49]

As has already been hinted, the second run of animation clearly highlighted the predominance of males in this network. More specifically, like the first one, it also showed how the three original blogs are increasingly drawn towards each other over time. Interestingly, even when the duration of a link is reduced – from infinity to 30 days – this same pattern is still clearly visible. In practical terms, this

means that the ties between the constituent members of the geezer phlegm are maintained through *continual* back-slapping. The phlegm, conceived in this way, is not a static structure, but rather in a constant state of becoming – the protagonists choose each other, over and over again. [50]

Step three in the process involved the author interviewing each of the other two bloggers; the ones who maintain *Mothugg* and *Intensifier*. These interviews were structured along the list of links that run between the three bloggers. Emphasis was put on discussing the context of each instance of linking, which may have featured anything from individual psychologies to shared offline events that have sparked the link in question. [51]

This step, also has its method-related limitations. It would, for instance, have been interesting to have more quali-quantitative data even at this level. In this way, the analysis would be able to “open up” this monadal level, in which a new universe of imitative radiation is revealed – highlighting that the tier above is an aggregate of *only certain* aspects that the monads. At worst, the chosen approach risks being simply an ethnography with fancy, computer-aided navigation. Nevertheless, these data shortage-related shortcomings aside, it does hopefully lead us somewhat closer to one contemporary version of the sociological method imagined by Tarde. [52]

Finally, in step four, the effects of the project – notably the publishing of animations – was studied. This last step involved a study of the extent to which the animation was downloaded and thus turned into an imitative ray – a Latourian plug-in, forging subjectivities and influencing decisions. In terms of method, this study was based on interviews, clustered with the ones conducted in step three. [53]

5. Homosocial resonances and the *gubbslem* plug-in

As already hinted in this text, both the first and second runs of mapping show clearly that in this chosen part of the Swedish blogosphere, there is indeed a male-dominated aggregate. Moreover, looking more specifically at this piece of phlegm, one can note that, on average, the men in this network tend to link to other men. [54]

Nevertheless, as any aggregate structure, it is composed of *just one*, singular aspect of the monad-level interactions. When zooming in at the monads – in the aggregate only represented by homosocially inclined linking patterns – the observer finds a whole universe of imitative rays clashing with each other, generating interferences and resonances. There is, to paraphrase Tarde, less logic in the animations than in the monad-level processes that yield this aggregate. By interrogating the singular event in which a link created, the analyst can confirm that the small is, indeed, “astronomically massive in size and range” (Latour, 2005: 244). [55]

Thus, the ethnography of the linking events suggest that there is host of imitative rays that influence linking patterns. Among these, one will find “the usual suspects” – heteronormativity, coupledness and preconceived ideas about gender. Nevertheless, there are also a host of other, seemingly more mundane factors that interfere with such imitative rays, creating resonances and feedback in this system, amplifying its tendency to yield homosocial outcomes. [56]

Looking at the links in detail, it should first be noted that in this case, the online world very much reflects the offline world – an idea that dovetails with previous ethnographies of Internet use (cf. Miller and Slater, 2000). In other words, many of the links created are prompted by offline socialising among bloggers – the pub encounter mentioned in the beginning of section four being a case in point. As hinted in the introduction, off-duty settings are instrumental in the emergence of these cross-

disciplinary associations. Here, the protagonists' search for extra-faculty collaborations acts in interference with notions of heteronormativity and coupledness: These associations can only emerge after hours, and in heterosexual and non-single contexts, opposite-sex socialising is less likely to occur. Here, tiny differences in probabilities on the monad level may have a substantial impact on outcomes at the macro level. [57]

The fact that the protagonists are relatively detached from their respective academic settings is also a highly relevant: In Deleuzoguattarian terms, “destratified” elements are more likely to be sucked into other (more or less stratified) structures. Indeed, the somewhat detached position of the protagonists render them fertile as “plasma” (Latour, 2005: 244), receptive towards the “contagion” of certain imitative rays, in the form of theories. However, as the flow of these ideas increases, and the production of concepts intensifies, a certain degree of cliquiness inevitably emerges. While not necessarily gender-specific – males are also excluded from such cliques – this nevertheless amplifies the homosocial tendencies of the network. Thus, while the actual content of the blog links have not been covered in this analysis, the ideas transmitted through the blogosphere cannot be disregarded in the analysis of the phlegm. Indeed, it would have been interesting to study how words like “complexity”, “stratification”, “phyla” and “panspectrocinism” have spread in the blog posts. [58]

These tendencies are also amplified by machiavellian power games within the protagonists' respective faculties. Indeed, it has been in their interests to steer away from incumbent modes of thought – be it “text-obsessed” social theory, or sterile stat-oriented political science – and explore alternative theoretical trajectories. Such “bold” trajectories, together with a supportive attitude towards each other's work – and a cocksureness sometimes associated with young males – has the effect of excluding outsiders. However, these factors are probably better understood in terms of production: The phlegm is not to be seen in negative terms – as a result of the protagonists rejecting outsiders – but as the result of intensified collaboration. Indeed, phlegm as an aggregate category – as captured in the second, “short-duration link” animation – is defined as *frequent* backslapping which *on average* is gendered. [59]

In some cases, the production of the phlegm is also overcoded by the protagonists' explicit talk about the group in “we” terms. Here, the romance of prominent intellectual “sets” seems to have infected the psyches of a couple of the protagonists. Nevertheless, as will be explored further below, this process is a two-way process – outsiders have also tended to categorise the network of individuals as one unit. [60]

Heteronormativity, coupledness, the joys of socialising with colleagues in a bar, Deleuzian theory, machiavellian compulsions to distance oneself from senior staff, male cocksureness, the romance of intellectual sets. These are, of course, only a few aspects of the “thick layer of imitative radiation” that yield intra-psyches. The above list of factors that intermingle can by no means be an exhaustive one. However, this is the very point of the analysis: It is a story of complex interplays of several imitative rays – the kinds of interferences and resonances that contingently emerge when multiple “plug-ins” come together through relations of exteriority. Thus, as opposed to the concept of intersectionality – which primarily discusses the intermingling of known categories – it highlights the chaotic and contingent outcomes of clashing rays (of which many are unknown and uncharted). [61]

Besides the study of the resonances and interference patterns that emerge in the imitative radiation among the blogging protagonists, there is another interesting aspect of this project – the fact that the mapping of the phlegm became an imitative ray in its own right. Tracing the propagation of this ray – and studying its effects in terms of actions, decisions and hesitations – the researcher can get a sense of

how intra-psychology is affected by extra-psychology. As such, the mapping is one example of a subjectivity-yielding Latourian plug-ins – *literally* subject to downloading. [62]

One approach towards examining the propagation of the ray is to trace the downloading of the animations. Thus, the first-run animation was accessed 162 times (corresponding to 2,26 GB of data) in March, 83 times (639 MB) in April, and 59 times (624 MB) in May. The second-run animation – a much larger file – was accessed 120 times in April, corresponding to 4 GB of data. Judging from the IP addresses that have downloaded large amounts of data from the author's blog during these months, the files were primarily propagated within the University of Gothenburg. (At this point, the author has not been able to access the log that specifies the IP addresses that has accessed the two files in question.) [63]

The fact that the imitative ray has spread primarily within the university is probably mostly due to the fact that many these actors are already enrolled in the project. There are, however, indications that point towards the fact that fiberoptic cables also play a role – some non-academics in the blogosphere complained that the files were too large for them to download. (Academics, on the other hand, usually enjoy high-speed Internet connections.) Thus, when constructing an epidemiology for this technologically mediated imitative ray, the fact that the “virus” can only propagate itself in high bandwidth environments must be borne in mind. The materiality of the medium that carries the contagion is crucial in this regard. [64]

The most immediate effect of the posting of the first-run animation is the fact that the linking patterns among the blogs changed: Male bloggers in the network started linking more frequently to female bloggers more loosely associated to the network, and vice versa. As such, the posting itself dissolved some of the homogeneity of the phlegm. This dissolving effect is in fact visible in the second-run animation of the linking patterns. While this effect has subsided somewhat, the linking patterns are still somewhat less homogeneous than prior to the mapping. (One associated male blogger has even made a habit out of regularly referencing female bloggers.) [65]

The most interesting effects of the imitative ray are, however, to be found offline. For one, there are instances where actions and decision-making of the three blogging protagonists have been affected: When approached to contribute as a joint author in a comment piece, one of the bloggers – in the midst of the discussion on his being a part of geezer phlegm – stated two conditions for his participation: That the previously all-male list of authors had to feature women, and that one notorious anti-feminist writer ought to be scrapped from the list. (These conditions were subsequently met.) Similarly, there are instances where the imitative ray has hit human actors outside the group of bloggers, shaping their decision-making. For example, the geezer phlegm mapping has been referenced in discussions on whether the protagonists are to be included in certain projects. [66]

The mapping of the phlegm has not only had dissolving effects. Like any scientific endeavour, its effects are performative as well as descriptive: Prior to the project, there was considerably less talk about the three protagonists as a group than after the mapping. The animations have thus served to stabilise the identity of the group. [67]

These examples highlight that the social – construed as a type of connection – is indeed variable, in two senses of the word. Not only can associations be shifted, in this case with respect to the gendered composition of humans involved – the social itself was altered as the *gubbslem* mapping intermingled with the collective of humans and non-humans. This leads us towards the issue of pragmatic uses of the ideas in this project. [68]

6. Discussion

What, then, does it mean to say that the aggregate structures are outcomes of interferences and resonances among imitative rays, virally transmitted at the level of the monad? What does it add to already ongoing discussions on gender? Does it help us in devising means with which to create a more level playing field? [69]

In many ways, this research feeds directly into contemporary discussions on how gender is done; how it is performed in different local settings. In these discussions, the making of gender is always situated and context-bound. There are, however, novel aspects of this Tarde-inspired approach. For one, the language – and the whole ontology – is closely aligned with the natural sciences. The study of homosociality as “male bonding” is by no means new, but this approach causes researchers to think of *bonding* in the sense of atoms interacting. [70]

Indeed, for Tarde, the principles of association, imitation and innovation are universal, applicable to societies of atoms as well as societies of humans (cf. Latour, 2005: 14) – hence the use of terms and concepts from the natural sciences. More than just metaphors, the notions of interference and resonance represent a shift in the understanding of how aggregates emerge. As mentioned in the previous section, they yield a view of aggregates emerging from a multitude of crashing factors – many of which unknown. That is not, however, to deny that these aggregate structures do emerge: It is just that these outcomes cannot be explained easily through a small number of essential traits. [71]

One way to approach this issue is through the “population thinking” sketched by DeLanda (2002: 56-62). In such thinking, all “organic phenomena are composed of unique features and can be described collectively only in statistical terms”, as opposed to the “typologist” thinking where there “are a limited number of fixed unchangeable 'ideas' underlying the observed variability” (58). The focus is in the analysis thus shifts away from studying how known eternal “ideas” – say heteronormativity or preconceived ideas about gender – are represented over and over again, in the same way, in different settings. Instead, the intensive processes of resonance and interference become the focal points of the analysis – what are the intermingling logics that yield the statistically homogeneous whole? [72]

This, along with the natural science influences mentioned above also open up for a “post-human” perspective – on subjectivities as plug-ins, on intra-psyches emerging from extra-psyche contamination, and on decision-making and hesitation as results of clashing imitative rays. This enables researchers to talk about *gubbslem* not as a structure, but as a logic – in Deleuzian terms, a *machine* – that works upon matter-energy. The feminist agenda that opens up on the basis of this idea steers clear of the twin “humanist” projects of either finding what it is to be a non-gendered human, or finding what it is to be a Good male human. Rather, the agenda focuses on how this virtual slime machine can be recognised – and maybe even counteracted – as it clicks into operation. This idea will be developed in another paper. (Palmås, 2008b) [73]

In more practical political terms, this approach also steers us away from the more deconstructive approaches to critique that have been popular in recent years. As noted above, “the usual suspects” - the -isms and -ivities deconstructed in arts pages and cultural magazines across the land – *do* matter. However, they do so *only* as plug-ins, as contagions, in *complex interplay* with other plug-ins and contaminations that amplify their effects. Most of all, these 'ideas' ought not to be construed in the typologist-cum-essentialist manner described above. Thus, while there is still room for techniques of debunking and deconstruction, one may modestly state that it may be time to study how they function

relations of exteriority – not as that which gives human subjects their essence. (cf. DeLanda, 2006: 16) [74]

As for future projects drawing on similar theories and methods, the field is open for analyses more in-depth, and better operationalised, than this one. (This project is merely a first stab at that what is becoming possible.) At this point, we have just reached a stage when – as mentioned above – panspectric data does allow us to trace the social in new ways. Interestingly, in doing so, we – the social scientists – will be deploying the same diagram currently used for corporations' control over markets, or states' surveillance of their citizens. As Andrew Barry and Nigel Thrift note,

a certain form of Tardean programme for social research is only beginning to be realized, although it is likely to be carried out not primarily by academic researchers but by corporations, market research agencies, governments, and regulators (Barry & Thrift, 2007: 521) [75]

At least, with social scientists entering this domain, the panspectric gaze will not be a corporate prerogative. If anything, the major political shortcoming of the follow-the-phlegm project is that it monitors too little. In order for this project to become an effective means of dissolving male slime, the tools with which to visualise phlegm in-the-making need to be democratised. In this way, concerned parties can collectively create methods of blanket surveillance, alerting us whenever the slime machine clicks into operation. [76]

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