Creative destructions:
Gabriel Tarde’s concept of a passionate economy

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This paper traces the connection between destruction and performativity in the light of Gabriel Tarde’s concept of economics. At the start of the twentieth century, Tarde formulated a theory of economic process as an innovation process that is driven by constitutive disruptions. Tarde conceived destruction as a moment of separation that nevertheless creates connections, associations and translations between actors. Born from disruption, these temporary, fragile alliances between actors are fomented by their irrational, subjective desire for the new. Tarde anticipates what Schumpeter some years later described as “creative destruction”, but explains the innovative power of destruction ‘psychologically’, relating it to the passion of the actors who follow a philosophy of possession.

Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, Gabriel Tarde described ‘economy’ as a process of innovation that is driven by disruptions. Although the concepts are not fully coterminous, he was anticipating what Joseph Schumpeter would elaborate under the label of ‘creative destruction’ between 1911 (The Theory of Economic Development) and 1942 (Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy).\(^1\) This chapter will show that at the beginning of the twentieth century, across a broad disciplinary and interdisciplinary front in both arts and sciences, a manner of experimental thinking developed that saw disruption or destruction as a constitutive component of systems and organisms, which themselves were now regarded as dynamic and open towards their environment. This way of thinking is based on knowledge practices that I would like to call ‘performative’: it is assumed that only in concrete (that is, experimental) practice – in action – does the object of study come into being, and that this object does not point to something ‘behind’ it, to some ‘essence’ or ‘book of life’, but constitutes itself solely within the research process and in relation to its environment, and must continually be re-produced with the help of various materials, artefacts and signs. Emphasis is placed on the dynamic character of the processes of producing knowledge, which are powered by disruptions and irritations to the status quo.

After this historical contextualisation, I will focus on Gabriel Tarde’s concept of the economy in order to describe more specifically the destructive dynamic of economic processes that inheres in ‘creative destruction’. I hope to show that since the early twentieth century, ideas of innovation that may from today’s perspective be called ‘performative’ have considered a ‘destructive dynamic’ to be constitutive of the vitality of economic processes – which

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1 On Schumpeter’s theory of creative destruction, see Schumpeter 1976; Reisman 2004; Freye 2009; Gaffard 2009.
thus become processes of knowledge generation. Tarde, especially, developed a concept of innovation that combines psychology, sociology and economics in a manner currently attracting new interest, for example in the course of discussions on the loss of consumer and investor ‘confidence’ as a fundamental economic factor.

Tarde’s theory of innovation stands at the beginning of debates about the meaning and significance of creative destruction in economic processes, but it also differs fundamentally from subsequent explanatory models in its ‘psychological’ orientation on the passions of actors. The reason for this discontinuity must be sought in the dearth of attention to Gabriel Tarde’s work from the 1920s on, both in his own discipline of sociology (due to the dominance of Émile Durkheim) and in economics (economics having separated off from sociology in the early twentieth century). It was only his rediscovery by Gilles Deleuze and Bruno Latour that enabled a recognition of the importance of Tardean thinking for sociology and economics.

The singularity of Tarde’s concept of creative destruction lies in his understanding of the economy as a process of innovation that is based on destruction. Here, destruction is not simply an impulse, a resistance or opposition by the new; it takes on multidimensional functions. Destruction’s moment is not one of separation and annihilation but, on the contrary, a) one of combining elements that, in their varying repetition, are scattered by destruction and re-integrated in the new, b) an initiator of the translational processes precipitated by the new, and c) an opportunity for associations of actors to take shape. Tarde’s notion of creative destruction should thus be thought of as simultaneously both dispersion and (temporary) bonding.

For Tarde, actors’ desire for the new is the driving force of creative destruction. He thus initiates a tradition of thinking about economic and societal processes in which the performance of destruction and of production maintain a complex relationship – one that Tarde explains by means of the passion and desire of actors pursuing a philosophy of possession (Thrift 2010, 250). Tarde describes the actors’ faith, their fear, their trust, their desire not as a consequence and effect of economic processes but, in its capacity as ‘psychology’, as the founder of the economy.

This raises, however, a question which will form the boundary of the present essay’s reach: whether Tarde’s conception of the economic portrays a form of knowledge that capitalises on the wishes of actors and their passion for the new, one we should regard today as the ‘truth regime’ of the knowledge and information society – based on the commitment of the entrepreneurial indi-

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2 Schumpeter, for example, called for an ‘exact’ depiction that makes use of mathematical functions: Schumpeter 2010: 49. Only from the 1980s did economic sociology emerge as a subdiscipline of sociology, though not of economics.

3 See, for example, Lazzarato 2002; Borch, Stäheli 2009; the essays collected in Candea 2010 and in particular Nigel Thrift’s contribution: Thrift 2010: 248–70.
vidual (Bröckling 2007), on a fascination with the self (Boltanski, Chiapello 2005) – that emerged during the early twentieth century in the context of avant-garde and experimental sciences (Sennett 2006; Illouz 2008; Vogl 2008; Thrift 2010, 262 ff).

The productivity of destruction

In the war-battered Europe of the twentieth century’s first three decades, the productive dynamic of destructive processes was discovered across a wide range of disciplines as the object of a ‘performative epistemology’: of knowledge practices that do not ‘find’ knowledge but ‘make’ it in the course of its experimental investigation, subject it to continual revisions, develop it precisely in friction with the things that oppose it, impede it, perhaps do not wish to be known. The new medium of radio, for example, was introduced to Europe through disastrous situations (Rothe 2009); the accident became a category of aesthetics (Robert Musil and Franz Kafka come to mind); destruction became a central category of thought, from Walter Benjamin and the aura to Ernst Jünger and the training of the soldierly self. In psychoanalysis (Freud’s death drive) and international law (Carl Schmitt’s concept of enmity), as well, the productivity of destruction became an important theme. Thinking about destructivity went hand in hand with thinking about performativity, as can be seen particularly clearly in more recent biological, psychological and physiological concepts of homeostasis. In the early twentieth century, such concepts premised a regulation of self-regulation directed by the environment (Kurt Goldstein, Jakob von Uexküll, Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Lewin), regulation no longer being understood as a static process of readjustment that reacts to disruption in order to recreate a preceding balance (an assumed ideal state of equilibrium, for example in the work of Claude

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4 This involves an expanded concept of the experiment, one that comes from scientific practice but goes beyond traditional definitions. The changed understanding of the nature of the experiment should be located in the context of a redefinition unfolding in the course of the 1920s and early 1930s: the experiment was increasingly seen as a creative act that itself produced innovative objects of research. In 1928, Hugo Dingler, a German mathematician and philosopher associated with operationalist-pragmatist epistemology, depicted the activity of experimenting as an ordered and productive action; in 1934 the French theorist of science Gaston Bachelard used the term ‘phenomenotechnique’ to address the constructive nature of the experiment; and in 1935 the Polish microbiologist Ludwik Fleck outlined the social and conceptual preconditions of experimentation. See Dingler 1928; Bachelard 1934/1984; Fleck 1935/1979. For these scientists, the experiment is marked by vagueness. It revolves around the non-repeatable and non-determined, undermines concepts, proliferates possibilities of thinking and is open for changes in meaning. On this, see Rheinberger, Hagner 1993; Rheinberger 2010; Griesecke 2008; Griesecke et al 2008.

5 Further examples can be found in Encke 2006 and Kassung 2007.

6 More generally on this point: Martin et al 2008.
Bernard, Walter Cannon or Fritz Perls). Instead, such disruptions were now seen as integral components of a form of self-regulation oriented on innovation (Rothe, Innerhofer 2010; Metzger 1986). Disruptions were no longer regarded as a destabilisation of the organism, or of a closed system, that needed to be balanced out, but rather as the motor of an innovative development that indicated the flexibility and dynamism of an open, constantly modified system (Stemberger 1998, 304). Disruptions could not be excluded; and if, on the one hand, they destabilised an order, on the other they opened up the possibility of variation, thus of change.

Like the early notions of homeostasis, concerned with equilibrium, the more recent models concerned with self-regulation through disruption have been closely bound up with socialist, democratic or liberal concepts of society (Tanner 1998). Regarded as the principle not only of the organism but also of society, homeostasis claimed a central place in the disciplines of sociology, law and economics (Canguilhem 1988). At the beginning of the twentieth century, economists such as Gabriel Tarde and Joseph Alois Schumpeter began to reassess the concepts of classical economics propounded by Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Jean-Baptiste Say and others. The revision was directed primarily at the notion of a homeostatic process of equilibrium in closed economic cycles – the idea that the market reacts to disruptions, for example a drop in prices, with readjustments in order to reinstate the ‘natural price’ (Adam Smith).

In the following, I will present Gabriel Tarde’s relatively little-known concept of the psychological economy as part of an epistemology of the performative in which the destructive is a constitutive element of dynamic knowledge production, a process where the initial destruction is not simply the assertion of one impulse against others, as in Schumpeter’s model, but the beginning of a collective process of innovation. These ideas were set out in ‘La psychologie en économie politique’ of 1881 and La Psychologie économique of 1902.7 For Tarde, innovation does not arise from the self-interest of the individual, but from the cooperation of many actors. Furthermore, Tarde emphasises ‘psychological’ forces, the role of passions and convictions – that is, the irrational, ‘un-economic’ aspects of the joint action of participants in the innovation process. In Tarde’s view, destruction is not a mere occupation of unknown territory, but the beginning of a collective ‘translation’ (Latour 1986) in the course of which the innovation comes about.

Tarde’s passionate economy

7 In the following I will make use of the study by B. Latour and V.A. Lépinay, The Science of Passionate Interests: An Introduction to Gabriel Tarde’s Economic Anthropology. Latour, Lépinay 2009.
‘I speak of these profound troubles of the economic and moral regime of a people in which a religious conversion, a political transformation, the simultaneous appearance of several great innovations suddenly introduces new convictions and new needs that imply a partial negation or suppression of the principles and mores accepted hitherto. This abrupt transformation of faith and public opinion, always violent and preceded by internal struggles if not street battles, results in the creation of a host of new products that actually destroy the value of the old ones.’ (Tarde 1897, 200)8

Writing before 1900, Gabriel Tarde here already formulates a theory of an economic process founded on destruction. But he does not explain the power of ‘creative destruction’ solely by the self-interest of the creative entrepreneur (Lazzarato 2000). Although, like Schumpeter later, he too attributes a high status to the inventor as ‘genius’, this is not because of the individual inventor’s singularity. Rather, the inventor is the ‘medium that makes new opportunities capable of being observed in the first place’ (Borch, Stäheli 2009, 17). The inventor everywhere discovers contradictions and thus new possibilities, not least within the familiar. He or she hybridises things that are already established by breaking apart their ‘habitual connections’ and recombining the ‘debris’ to create something new – something that was, however, already present as a potential in the traditional version (Tarde 1893/1904, 126).9 For Tarde, then, innovation is characterised by creative destruction, but is crucially dependent on the inventions of others. Tarde does not describe creative destruction as a linear process where the ‘old’ is annihilated and geniuses create the ‘new’. Often, the new arises precisely through the recombination of already successful, ‘old’ inventions (Tarde 1903, 44f). Parts of what has been shattered by the innovation are, therefore, still present in the innovation. Destruction and innovation interlock, existing as simultaneously past and new. The innovation creates associations between what was oppositional in the past:

‘The essence of an invention is to have forces make reciprocal use of each other which previously seemed to be alien or opposed to each other; the invention is an association of forces that replaces an opposition or sterile juxtaposition of forces.’ (Tarde 1897, 222)

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8 Translator’s note: Here and throughout, translations from French and German sources are my own unless otherwise indicated.
9 The full passage runs: ‘Dans le génie, en effet, le besoin de critique destructive existe aussi bien que le besoin de création inventive; mais le premier est au service du second, son esprit critique ne brise les liaisons habituelles d’idées que pour enrichir de leurs débris son imagination qui les emplie. Ce qu’il y a de particulier, et d’essentiel, c’est qu’il aperçoit le premier nettement ce caractère inhérent à certaines notions, ou à certaines actions, de se contredire ou de s’entraîner, et la possibilité inhérente à certaines autres actions ou notions d’être associées de telle manière qu’elles se confirment ou qu’elles collaboreront.’ Tarde 1893/1904: 126.
In Tarde’s logic of the innovation, thus, the chronological sequence of destruction and innovation is revoked in a model of simultaneous association, and the new is constituted by proliferating what has been destroyed in a reassembly of the heterogeneous debris. It is, in turn, this heterogeneous composition that characterises the innovatory process as a co-production by past and present actors. The process rests quite fundamentally on cooperation, not on opposition – and not on an opposition between destructive and productive dynamics.

However, the innovation’s cooperative, ‘social’ quality does not arise simply from its association with what has been destroyed (Tarde 1903, 145). The invention only becomes an innovation when it is realised socially. Subjective habits, opinions and tastes in the here and now must amalgamate with the invention; it must become repeatable and communicable in order for a value to be established. The economic process of innovation is borne along by both the diversity of desires and their similarity:

‘Economic progress supposes two things: on the one hand, a growing number of different desires, for, without a difference in desires, no exchange is possible, and, with the appearance of each new, different desire, the life of exchange is kindled. On the other hand, a growing number of similar exemplars of each desire taken separately, for, without this similitude, no industry is possible, and, the more this similitude expands or prolongs itself, the more production is widened or reinforced.’ (Tarde 1902/2007, 639, original emphasis)

That is to say, difference stimulates exchange, while at the same time the similarity of desires is necessary for the innovation to assert itself economically. Tarde regards this similarity as being constituted through communicative media:

‘Conversation is eminently interesting to the economist. There is no economic relationship between men that is not first accompanied by an exchange of words, whether verbal, written, printed, telegraphed, or telephoned. […] Most often, thanks again to conversations, which had spread the idea of new product to buy or to produce from one interlocutor to another, and, along with this idea, had spread trust in the qualities of the product or in its forthcoming output, and, finally, the desire to consume it or to manufacture it. […] There is no manager more powerful than consumption, nor, as a result, any factor more powerful – albeit indirect – in production than the chatter of individuals in their idle hours.’ (Tarde quoted in Latour, Lépinay 2009, 48–9)

In generating ‘similitude’, communication, advertising, the press, school, fashion, cities and their social density – all factors not normally regarded by economists as primary sources of added value – contribute to the social quality of production and consumption, because they repeat the innovation. ‘Chatter’ is thus an essential factor of production, a notion that attains astonish-
ingly modern relevance in view of the current power of rating agencies to drive entire states into bankruptcy. However, it is not the case that the same thing is merely repeated. The ‘chatter’ that generates similitude also brings about variation. ‘Repetition exists, then, for the sake of variation’ (Tarde 1903, 7); similarity and distinction intertwine.

Thus, for Tarde, the interplay of invention and cooperation does not simply set off a momentum based on creative destruction that will replace the old with the new. Rather than this linear logic, argues Tarde, the productive cycle is constituted by an internal dynamic, a rhythm. Through invention, differences from what has previously existed appear, recur (in Tarde’s terms, ‘repetition’) and are thereby disseminated, in the process producing conflicts (‘opposition’). The production of further differences makes it possible to escape this opposition, through ‘adaptation’. In each repetition, variations occur that may themselves be innovations, and the cycle begins again (Latour, Lépinay 2009, 34, 39). That process, discussed by Gilles Deleuze in Difference and Repetition with direct reference to Tarde (Deleuze 1994), is constantly in flux and cannot be brought to a standstill by a single formula: innovations, differentiation and repetition constantly generate new connections that keep the economic process running. The events of repetition can therefore never be purged of heterogeneity. For Tarde, the force of creative destruction is not a force that could potentially prevail as a ‘same’, assuming some ‘originality’ only marginally weakened by its encounter with resistance. Tarde does not, then, accord a high status in the productive economic process to binary oppositions like the ones that shape, for example, Schumpeter’s concept of creative destruction. Schumpeter sets the creative entrepreneur and his original idea in opposition to the market’s actors, who preserve the status quo of competition and against whom the entrepreneur asserts his innovation. Tarde’s concept of innovation, by contrast, is not an oppositional one. He regards the dichotomy of binary oppositions not as the prototype of creative destruction, but merely as a derived and simplified form of difference (Balke 2009, 143). Tarde is interested in the process of innovation and invention as a creative collaboration marked not solely by opposition but also, and more importantly, by adaptation and repetition (Tarde 1899/2009). Opposition is, for Tarde, a simple act of negation that does not in itself give rise to something new, but only changes the starting conditions (Balke 2009, 144).

The force of creative destruction, in contrast, is a force of innovative dispersion that arises in the processes of translation between heterogeneous cooper-

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10 Tarde speaks of the ‘tendency of a given invention or social adaptation to become larger and more complex by adapting itself to some other invention or adaptation, and thus create a new adaptation, which, through other encounters and logical combinations of the same sort, leads to a higher synthesis, and so on’. Tarde 1899/2009, 171.
In Tarde’s model, each actor, each repetition (and thus also what has been destroyed) makes an active contribution to the process of innovation. Innovation takes shape only in the course of cooperation (Latour 1986). Whether a particular destruction becomes a creative, innovative force in the economic process is decided by the ‘chatter’ of the actors, their convictions, activities and desires.

The economic process is not, then, propelled by abstract economic or social laws, but by the subjective interests of actors forming networks. It is driven by the wishes, desires, passions and judgements of the actors.

‘It remains true that value, of which money is but the sign, is nothing, absolutely nothing, if not a combination of entirely subjective things, of beliefs and desires, of ideas and volitions, and that the peaks and troughs of values in the stock market, unlike oscillations of a barometer, could not even remotely be explained without considering their psychological causes: fits of hope or discouragement in the public, propagation of a good or a bad sensational story in the minds of speculators.’ (Tarde 1902/2007, 630)

Tarde here sketches a dual movement in the production of value. On the one hand it is dependent on individual, psychological factors; on the other, this subjectivity does not remain individual but transmits itself to other actors by means of ‘imitation’ (Tarde 1903). This diffusion is based on trust and the exchange of opinion, on persuasion and conviction – in other words, on a rhetoric whose reach and intensity is determined by communicative media (Latour, Lépinay 2009, 12, 17–18).

In this point Tarde contradicts Durkheim, arguing that the social and the economic do not exist as separate fields, but are both merely principles of connection and reciprocal impact, webs of desires and beliefs. For Tarde, thus, there is neither macrostructure nor microstructure, but only cooperations which arise in the performative transformation process of creative destruction and which, through innovations, drive on the economic process. The economic process is a translation process of fluid differentiations, which cannot be planned or controlled and is not determined by a ‘higher’ structure. Economics is bound to a logic of events, and constitutes itself in the practice of many, heterogeneous actors, in the implementation of their interests and passions.

In other words, creative destruction, the motor of economic processes, is not conceived of as an individual achievement, an originary impulse, but as a social occurrence that is, so to speak, infused with destruction – with the ‘debris’ of the destroyed in inventions, with disruptions in the repetition leading to variations, but also (and fundamentally) as a vital force of the social itself that draws its dynamism and flexibility from disruptions. In order to understand this, it is necessary to look briefly at Tarde’s research programme

**Monadology**

For Tarde, the social or society does not constitute a higher or more complex order. Rather, a society of whatever provenance (including, for example, a stellar or animal society) consists in an assemblage of intertwined monads that form a force field in the sense of a topological space: dynamic, temporary, contingent and formed, net-like, by effects, attractions and repulsions. The social order made up of networked monads is always threatened by destruction. Destruction is the past and future of the social, for no monad can be part of the social order completely or for the long term:

‘Let us insist on this paramount truth: we move towards it by noting that in each of these great, regular mechanisms – the social, the vital, the stellar, the molecular – all the internal revolts which ultimately break them are provoked by an analogous condition: their components, soldiers of those various regiments, temporary incarnations of their laws, only ever belong with one side of their being to the world that they constitute, while with other sides they escape it. This world would not exist without them; but they would continue to exist without it. The attributes each element owes to its incorporation in its regiment do not make up its entire nature; it has other inclinations and instincts that come from different enrolments; and yet others, consequently (and we will see the necessity of this consequence), that come from its depths, from itself, from the very fundamental substance upon which it is able to draw in its fight against the power of the collective, wider but shallower, of which it is a part but which is only an artificial being, composed of the sides and facades of beings.’ (Tarde 1893/1999, 38–9)

Monads, then, form only unstable aggregates that are not held together by a harmony already in existence, as, for example, in Leibniz’s thinking (‘Principes de la Nature et de la Grâce fondés en Raison’, 1714), but make up an ephemeral field of interests through their ‘sides and facades’. Sooner or later they establish new differences, destroying the existing association. The monads cannot be connected by means of ‘identity’, only by means of possession. Tarde begins from the postulate ‘I have’ as the fundamental fact (Tarde 1893/1999, 43); for every monad, ‘je désire, je crois, donc j’ai’ applies, not ‘cogito ergo sum’ (Tarde 1893/1999, 43). In place of a metaphysics of being, Tarde installs a philosophy of having:

‘Up to now, all of philosophy has been founded on the verb to be, the definition of which seemed the philosopher’s stone to be discovered. It is fair to claim that many fruitless debates, much intellectual deadlock, might have been avoided if it had been founded instead on the verb to have. – From the principle I am, it is impossible, with
all the subtlety in the world, to deduce any other existence than mine; hence the negation of external reality. But if we first affirm the postulate I have as the fundamental fact, the had and the having [l’eu et l’ayant] are given at the same time as inseparable.’ (Tarde 1893/1999, 43)

The new, diverse and different, temporarily forming an aggregate through repetition without finality or leadership, follows no plan, no structure, no dialectic or metaphysics (Latour, Lépinay 2009, 42). It leads itself and follows itself in the rhythm of profits and losses, acquiring and investing, in a philosophy of having that rests not on entities but on properties (propriétés) and desires (Tarde 1893/1999, 43–4). One might also say that monads are not governed, but govern themselves by means of their interest in having. It is in the context of his monadology that we should understand Tarde’s psychological economy. Here, too, he describes performativity – the temporary networking of passionate actors which arises only in its own implementation, attaining meaning through repetition. Through this act the participants establish the ‘social’ or the ‘economic’, as a fragile construct not built for permanence or based on a panoptic knowledge. This performativity of temporary, fluid alliances is held together by a logic of having: alliances are formed according to what arouses desire, what it is that a number of actors want to possess. Tarde rejects the notion of an association based on identity, on ‘being’; for him, bonds arise solely through the collective interest in possession, through ‘wanting’. It is only their interest in innovations that, for a time, connects the monads and creates relationships. This same idea – that a material third party is necessary in order for social agreements to be reached – would be articulated by Walter Benjamin in the 1920s (Benjamin 1999, 289).

From this perspective, creative destruction cannot be understood only as a translation; that is, in the simultaneity of destruction and invention, the dynamic of difference and repetition, the force of diffusion with which Tarde explains the origins of innovations and imitation. It is important also to consider the social bonding force of creative destruction, since the constantly new – which even in Tarde’s view presupposes destruction, even if the debris of what has been destroyed remains effectual in the innovation – arouses the desire and passions of the actors, thus enabling temporally specific, fragile associations that, in turn, keep the economic process running. Through this social force of a passionate wanting-to-have of innovations, creative destruction becomes the precondition of all relationships, including economic ones. Tarde speaks of a ‘swarm of individual innovators’ (Tarde 1899/2009, 52) constantly demanding the new. There is a kind of compulsion to innovation,

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11 On the relationship of being and having in Leibnizian monadology, see also Deleuze 1992.
12 See also Blumentrath et al. 2009, 7–19.
13 The French phrase is ‘un fourmillement d’individualités novatrices’: Tarde 1899, 23.
to destruction, to dynamism; an impossibility of finality, of conservation. The continual generation of the new cannot function without destruction, although, importantly, Tarde understands creative destruction not as an originary impulse that manages to assert itself, but as a point of connection between various currents, at which cooperation enables innovations to be generated by actors and translated heterogeneously. For Tarde, creative destruction governs a process of invention – of knowledge generation – that aims for the new but does not therefore annihilate the old, instead dispersing it only to reassemble it in a different form. Seen this way, economics becomes an experiment in which the outcome is open and all sorts of actors, things, matters and media participate.

Psychopower

Following Tarde and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, one might thus regard the economy as an experimental system – that is, a system ‘of manipulation [of objects of knowledge] designed to give unknown answers to questions which themselves we are not yet able clearly to ask’ (Rheinberger 1995, 110). Experimental systems reveal the processes of knowledge production to be makeshift bricolage, the unexpected results of which give rise to new theories. They do not assume an antecedent knowledge, but target the elusive contingency of innovation. Disruptions keep the experimental system in motion; here, disruption is the regulator of a logic of innovation based on knowledge production.

The objective of an economy understood as ‘experimental’, like the one depicted by Tarde, is not equilibrium, status quo or freedom from disruption. Quite the contrary: interruption and interferences open up new options and possibilities, thus new connections and innovations. An ‘experimental’ economy along Tarde’s lines can, in this way, be described as a performative process of knowledge generation that is propelled by disruptions, is based on cooperation, and builds on the individual desires of actors and their inclination to imitate. Nigel Thrift describes Tarde’s concept of economics as a ‘political economy of propensity’ (Thrift 2010, 266) and applies it to present-day circumstances. He uses Tardean innovation theory to outline – rather uncritically – what Esposito calls the ‘biologization’ (Esposito 2008) of capitalism, which undertakes experiments to research the association of neurones and cultural and genetic codes with an eye to developing ‘neuromarketing’ (Thrift 2010, 263). The object of this ‘buyology’ (Lindstrom 2008, 6) is the motivations, feelings, wishes – that is, the passions – of consumers. It explores such issues as how the presence of particular brands in television formats stimulates purchasing behaviour on a semiconscious (neural) level, for
example by simulating ‘mimetic rays’, or ‘imitative rays’ in Tarde’s terms, and how these brands relate to hormone swashes. A ‘neuroeconomics’ of this kind, inspired by Tarde, aims to control the propensities of consumers, continually turning the entrepreneur’s wish into the wish of the consumer. Here Tarde’s monadology becomes a kind of ‘consumerology’ that could be located in the context of the psychotechnological industrial system of ‘psychopower’ and as a continuation of Foucault’s ‘biopower’: an operationalisation of the modern human subject in the systemic production of power-effects on the body, life and soul. If Deleuze saw the destructive dynamics of Tarde’s innovation theory, based on difference and repetition, as the foundation for a theory of subversions, it is now difficult to avoid the suspicion that Tarde delineated the very economy that is proving to be so flexible and durable not only despite, but because of, all its crises, and that accords a central role to the motivation of actors and their self-economisation.

References


14 Thrift, op. cit. (note 3), 263.
15 Ibid., 261.
18 See Boltanski and Chiapello, op. cit. (note 6); Bröckling, op. cit. (note 5); A. Reckwitz, Das hybride Subjekt. Eine Theorie der Subjektkulturen von der bürgerlichen Moderne zur Postmoderne (Weilerswist: Velbruek, 2006).


