

Social Innovation: The Ideas and Contributions of Gabriel Tarde

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Abstract: Social innovation (SI) has received increasing attention from policymakers and researchers. It has become one of the answers to contemporary societal challenges (Grimm et al., 2013), a policy in the European Union (Nicholls and Edmiston 2018), and is still an emerging area of innovation studies (Van der Have and Rubalcaba 2016). Even though the empirical history of SI is becoming well documented, its theoretical history has not received much attention. Exceptions include contributions to SI, where Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904) has been named as a source of a theory about SI. Motivated by these observations, this paper explores, describes, and discusses Tarde’s theoretical ideas about innovation in general and especially the category of SI by asking the following guiding question: What are Tarde’s innovation-related theoretical ideas and what is their relevance to SI research today? This theoretical discussion is based on three areas of literature: (i) a selection of 12 of Tarde’s original publications from 1890 to 1902, (ii) a selection of contemporary publications on SI, and (iii) a diverse selection of literature relevant to the development of innovation studies and SI studies. A central component of this paper is that it is based on original French publications and two early English translations that represent good sources for pinpointing when words and concepts were used in Tarde’s writings. This paper identifies and discusses three connections between Tarde and SI research. The first is the identification of three categories of innovation that cover examples of SI today. The second is his social theory, which emphasizes the role of invention and imitation in social change. The third is that Tarde is an early example of the theoretical idea of a combination of innovation and social change, which can also be identified in current research on SI. These findings could be of interest to those intrigued by how SIs today are the result of the diffusion or combination of earlier ideas with different sources (hybrids).

Keywords: Gabriel Tarde, innovation, invention, imitation, SI, combination perspective

1. Introduction

Social innovation (SI), that is, the development and implementation of new ideas to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborators (European Commission 2020, p. 6), has a long empirical (Drucker 1957; Mumford 2002; Godin 2012) and theoretical history. The term or category is not new (Sargant 1858; Ward 1903, p. 243; Thorp 1942, pp. 52, 53; Redlich 1949, p. 235), but it is little theorized. Early on, Ward (1903) mentioned that Tarde saw SI as advantageous to society, and much later, several researchers named Tarde as a possible forerunner of SI theory (Godin 2012; Jessop et al. 2014; Ayob et al. 2016; Howaldt and Schwarz 2017)—along with Schumpeter, the first modern theorist on innovation (Damanpour 2020). However, Tarde is still little explored in relation to innovation (Howaldt et al. 2015), and “the long forgotten early exponent of an integrated sociological theory of innovation” (Howaldt and Schwartz 2017, p. 169). Motivated by a lack of attention to theoretical history, this paper explores, describes, and discusses Tarde’s ideas about innovation, especially the category of SI, by discussing the question presented above: What are Tarde’s innovation-related theoretical ideas and what is their relevance to SI research today? More precisely, the purpose is to extract innovation-related ideas and to discuss and compare them in relation to contemporary SI research. By doing this, the paper contributes to SI research by discussing theoretical roots and history.

Methodologically, this theoretical discussion is based on a selection of Tarde publications and other relevant literature. Today, there are different editions of Tarde publications: Suhrkamp (Frankfurt), Metropolis (Marburg), Seuil (Paris), Synthélabo (Paris), Alcan (Paris), University of Chicago Press (Chicago), and Henry Holt & Company (New York). This paper uses original texts from 1890 to 1902 (two early translations from 1899 and 1903), as they are more readily available in digital formats today. Almost all the Tarde works included here are original Félix Alcan and V. Giard and E. Briere publications, representing good sources for pinpointing when words and concepts were used in Tarde’s writings. The author has translated all quotes from the French texts. The main criterion in the selection of the literature was the presence of exact information about when Tarde put forward certain ideas or showed a major shift in terminology (e.g., innovation). Among the included publications, four (Tarde 1890; 1895; 1898a; 1902) are especially important in their ability to illuminate the ideas that form the focus of this paper, and two are early English translations (Tarde 1890/1903; 1897/1899). Also, a selection of contemporary publications on SI, and a diverse selection of literature on the development of innovation and SI studies history (e.g., Clark 1969; Godin 2012; Pedersen 2021) and literature reviews (e.g., Van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016) are used. This selection has the possible limitation that Tarde is better covered than contemporary SI studies (though more publications were used to write this paper). Another limitation is the trade-off between the current focus and other interesting aspects of Tarde’s ideas. Finally, since the paper

explores old and new formulations of theoretical ideas, it has followed some of the recommendations from Merton (1967) on this type of discussion. Keywords are, for example, to examine the context, meaning and use of such earlier and contemporary formulations of concepts and ideas.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. After briefly presenting SI definitions and recent research, this paper outlines Tarde's ideas on innovation. This is followed by a discussion of the relevance today.

2. Social innovation today

As noted, over several years, SI has received interest from policymakers in different countries as a cross-sectoral, bottom-up solution to social or societal problems and challenges. Although SI has a longer history in the EU, it became a policy there after the 2007–2008 financial crisis, which led to a recession (and structural unemployment and social challenges) in many European economies (Grimm et al. 2013; European Commission 2020; Nicholls and Edmiston 2018). SI is a key element in the European 2020 strategy by the European Commission to facilitate and embed SI across Europe (Grimm et al. 2013; Nicholls and Edmiston 2018).

The term SI is not consistently used in studies of SI or in the literature on innovation (Moulaert et al. 2005; Edwards-Schachter and Wallace 2017; Van der Have and Rubalcaba 2016). In this paper, some definitions can be observed (Mulgan 2006; Mulgan et al. 2007; Phills et al. 2008; Howaldt et al. 2015; Voorberg et al. 2015; Nicholls and Edmiston 2018). Examples of elements in SI definitions are new ideas that create new social relationships (often bottom-up) and collaborators across organizational boundaries and sectors (Mulgan et al. 2007; European Commission 2020; Howaldt et al. 2015; Phills et al. 2008; Voorberg et al. 2015), better and sustainable solutions (Phills et al. 2008; Howaldt et al. 2015), and long-lasting outcomes (Voorberg et al. 2015), replicable models, and programs (Mulgan et al. 2007). Further, it is not restricted to what is called social policy (Mulgan et al. 2007; Phills et al. 2008) but has a broad conception of ideas or SI: products, services, models, technology, concepts, policy instruments, new forms of cooperation and organization, methods, processes, regulations, legislation, interventions, social movements, or a combination of these (EC 2020; Phills et al. 2008; Howaldt et al. 2015; Mulgan et al. 2007). Even though other elements may vary, commonalities in the definitions include social motivation and social purpose, SI as ideas, creative ways or activities to meet social needs or societal challenges (Mulgan 2006; European Commission 2020; Mulgan et al. 2007; Grimm et al. 2013), and social goals rather than profit as motives (Phills et al. 2008).

Further, the selection of literature reviews in this paper (Moulaert et al. 2005; Godin 2012; Phillips et al. 2015; Voorberg et al. 2015; Rana et al. 2014; Edwards-Schachter and Wallace 2017; Van der Have and Rubalcaba 2016; Galego et al. 2022) illustrates interest in identifying influential articles on SI (Ayob et al. 2016) and mapping its different research communities, such as psychology, creativity, social, and societal challenges, and local development (e.g. urban and regional issues) (Van der Have and Rubalcaba 2016). In these reviews, some reports have limited use of systematic methodology and confusion around the characteristics of SI (Edwards-Schachter and Wallace 2017), while others note that over the years, SI has taken on a set of meanings far removed from its sociological roots (Ayob et al. 2016). Tarde represents one such sociological root.

3. Gabriel Tarde and innovation

3.1 Tarde publications and innovation

Tarde uses the term invention in many publications, as is the case with the term innovation (Tarde 1890; 1890/1912; 1890/1903; 1894; 1895; 1897; 1897/1899; 1898a; 1898b; 1899; 1901/1910; 1902a; 1902b). The term innovation appears in Tarde's publications, which are touched on here, for example, Tarde's (1894) discussion of jurisprudence and his work on opposition (1897). In the latter work on his theoretical concept of opposition, he wrote, "When an artistic innovation emerges, in music, in painting, in poetry, the world of artists and amateurs is divided into two parties: those who welcome this novelty and those who reject it" (1897, p. 386). Tarde (1901), in *Opinion and the Crowd*, touched upon issues such as public opinion, the public, the press, and communication media. Tarde's (1899) discussion of the field of government can be seen as his contribution to political theory. Writing on sociology, Tarde (1898b, p. 61) mentioned that the discipline must handle problems such as the causes of invention and the reason why some inventions are imitated while others are not. Finally, in 1902, he wrote a large two-volume work on economic psychology. In this work, he organized economic phenomena into three concepts: economic repetition, economic opposition, and economic adaptation. For example, he used the term "entrepreneur" (1902b, p. 357, 368), a term also appearing in *La logic sociale* (Tarde 1895, p. 372). Even though Sargant (1858) used the term "social innovator," Tarde puts it in a theoretical

framework and contributes to the diffusion of SI as a category of innovation (Godin 2012). The next section focuses on Tarde's publications in relation to SI.

3.2 Tarde and social innovation

Tarde (1890) already uses the term innovation on page 2 in the first French edition of the *Laws of Imitation*. He uses this term several times, along with terms such as invention and discovery, stating, "By these two terms I mean any kind of an innovation throughout the range of social phenomena—language, religion, politics, law, industry, or art" (1890; 1890/1903, p. 2). This concept covers innovation not only as an economic phenomenon, but also as a social phenomenon. Further, he describes his theory of imitation, for example, why some innovations spread while others do not (1890/1903, p. 140), various forms of imitation, such as "counter-imitation" (p. xvii), fashion imitation and custom imitation (p. 14), fashion in all its forms (p. 16), and the role of networks, "occupation and education" in spread (1890/1903, p. 64). He said that "Every heard of wild cattle has its leaders, its influential heads" (1890/1903, p. 4), meaning the role of individual initiatives in new inventions and the role of social status in the spread. He believed that human interaction fostered the appearance of inventions, and he knew that "imitations are modified in passing from one race or nation to another" (p. 22).

Finally, he discusses the emergence of simple and complex combinations: "Several lines of imitation intersected one another in the brilliant eighteenth-century idea of applying steam-engine ... to the satisfaction of desire for ocean travel" (1890/1903, p. 44). Further, he states that "all inventions and discoveries are composed of prior imitations," and "these composites are themselves imitated and are destined to become, in turn, elements of more complex combinations" (p. 45). The result of this process is accumulation, and Tarde mentioned that "it follows that there is a genealogical tree of successful initiatives and that they appear in an *irreversible* ... sequence" (p. 45).

In *La logique sociale*, he included his theory of invention (1895, pp. 153–223). Here, he introduces the term "l'innovation sociale" (p. 129n) but uses it in a way like how he uses the term innovation elsewhere. He also uses phrases such as "a new idea is a combination of old ideas" (Tarde 1895, p. 171), "inventive creation" (p. 173), and "association" (p. 382). For example, he said that any association "is a kind of invention" and that "every invention is an association of previous inventions" (p. 382). The theoretical idea of combination is followed up here (p. 171), and he explains how complex inventions emerge, usually in three phases (1895, p. 192–5).

Tarde (1898a; 1897/1899), in discussing social laws and outlining sociology, dealt with three central concepts: repetition, opposition, and adaptation. Tarde discussed innovation in several places in the texts, and he used the terms "innovation sociale" (1898a, p. 54) and "social innovation" (1897/1899, p. 64). While he discusses the obstacles to the propagation of SI, he adds competition (Tardean competition) with other innovations to factors such as climate and race, stating, "The greatest impediment to the spread of a social innovation and its consolidation into a traditional custom is some other equally expansive innovation which it encounters during its course" (1897/1899, p. 64). "In fact, social innovation as discussed here is not different from innovation as used elsewhere in the text" (Godin 2012, p. 30). Tarde connects innovation to combination, noting that "Innovations are, for the most part, combinations of previous examples" (Tarde 1897/1899, p. 40).

Finally, Tarde (1902a) presented his explanation of social evolution and considered inventions to be an engine of social evolution. He stated that social transformations are explained by the imitation of successful individual initiatives (p. 1). Next, he maintained the use of the idea of combination: "Invention is always, by its very nature, an intersection of imitation rays, an original combination of imitations" (p. 4). "Every machine consists of old tools, old methods, combined in a different way" (p. 5). He maintained a broad conception, mentioning verbal (neologisms), ritual, political, industrial, judiciary, military, artistic, and literary innovations (p. 4). Here, it is noteworthy that he came closer to defining innovation. He made a distinction between theoretical inventions, such as scientific discoveries, and practical inventions, such as industrial innovations (p. 4). Theoretical inventions make their appearance before practical ones. He also distinguished between accumulable inventions and substitutable inventions, saying that, for example, scientific discoveries can accumulate ceaselessly, while industrial inventions often replace each other (p. 4).

4. Discussion: Connections between Tarde and later social innovation

While the previous section extracted some innovation-related ideas from Tarde's publications, the next section focuses on three connections between Tarde and contemporary SI research.

4.1 Three categories covering social innovation

The first connection concerns the categories of innovation. As identified, Tarde uses terms such as “innovations politiques,” “innovations juridiques” (1890; 1902a), and “l’innovation sociale” (1895; 1898a). At first glance, all of these cover how SI has been used over the years. For example, based on the examples Tarde uses in his old writings (e.g., 1890), the following examples from later SI research illustrate the point: innovation in law has its examples of retirement pensions, minimum age laws, working hours, and other rights (McVoy 1940), regulations related to the environment, sustainability, and fair trade (Mulgan et al. 2007; Phills et al. 2008), and patient rights and social laws. Political innovation includes collaboration between public and non-public actors, new governance structures (collaborative governance), grassroots initiatives, and community-based development (Moulaert et al. 2005; Galego et al. 2022). Furthermore, there are similarities to SI today, such as new models of participation and governance, and strategies of innovation (e.g., co-creation). For example, co-creation is connected to SI (Voorberg et al. 2015; Phills et al. 2008; Galego et al. 2022; Moulaert et al. 2007). Even though the labels are different, some of the principles and ideas are the same, including broader participation, collaboration, and the changing role of the public sector actor in the process, which conforms to several contemporary conceptions of SI (e.g., Phills et al. 2008; Moulaert and MacCallum 2019).

As noted, the term SI was indirectly introduced in 1890 and directly in 1895 and is also mentioned in his publication on social laws: “The major step that stops the expansion of a social innovation and its consolidation in traditional custom, is that some other expansive innovation that meets on its path” (Tarde 1898a, p. 54). He uses SI in the same way he uses innovation elsewhere. At second glance, even though the term SI may be interpreted as a category of innovation, it is correct to understand it more broadly to include any type of innovation, something supported by others as well (Godin 2012; Howaldt and Schwarz 2017).

4.2 Theory of social evolution

The second connection is how Tarde conceptualizes invention and innovation through his theories of invention (1895; 1902b, p. 230–253), imitation (1890/1903), and social evolution (1902a). He defined invention and imitation (1895, p. 382; 1890/1903, p. xiv) and claimed that, socially, “everything is either invention or imitation” (1890/1903, p. 3). Invention, innovation, and imitation are elements in Tarde’s theory of social evolution. Changes in societies or cultures depend on the introduction of inventions as infrequent products of genius (Tarde 1890, 1895). Whereas inventions are rare (landmarks) in human conduct, most human action can be explained by the flow of imitation (Kinnunen, 1996). Tarde had ideas about how imitations may be weakened and replaced by new inventions or subsequent imitations (1890/1903, p. 210). As he notes about industrial and other innovations, “it is the caprice of a chosen few before it becomes a public need and forms part of the necessities of life” (1897/1899, p. 194).

As seen, Tarde had a broad conception of innovation covering domains such as economy (industrial), public administration (political, law/judiciary, military), and culture (artistic, language/literary, ritual). His emphasis on social phenomena (1895, p. 193; 1902a, p. 4) was later interpreted as a wide variety of SIs (Godin 2012; Howaldt and Schwarz 2017). This means that the inventions that spread may be material or immaterial objects. This broad conception is, for example, commonly used in public sector innovation studies today (De Vries et al., 2016), and the broad conception of Tarde has been suggested in later literature since it includes a wide variety of SIs (Domanski et al. 2020; Howaldt et al. 2015). Such a wide conception was, as already noted, used by McVoy (1940) to study the pattern of diffusion of different types of innovations, such as governance structures, welfare schemes (e.g., services), and pieces of legislation. McVoy (1940) used the terms political invention, SI, and innovation.

Tarde used the term innovation interchangeably with invention, discoveries, and imitation and did not offer a precise and explicit definition (Godin 2012). Invention and imitation seem to be more important concepts; for example, he is most known for his laws on invention and imitation. However, imitation means dissemination and is central to social reproduction and change (1890/1903, p. 14). He used the term innovation in relation to his theory of imitation. Imitation has aspects of innovation, and innovation has aspects of imitation. Tarde (1902a) also had a distinction between theoretical and practical inventions (e.g., industrial innovations), which comes close to the later invention-innovation distinction in innovation literatures.

4.3 Combination of ideas

A third connection can be found in relation to the theoretical idea (or concept) of combination (Tarde 1890; 1895; 1898a; 1902a). This is a combination-accumulation view on invention and innovation, for example, that inventions such as the telegraph and railroads are the result of a “group of accumulated and yet distinguishable and numerable inventions” (1890/1903, p. 11n). Furthermore, Tarde (1902a) discussed new combinations of already existing resources and concepts. He believed that even the most genius poet or artist does nothing more than combine processes and elements that are already known in a different way (p. 5). This view of inventions is seen as a combination of previous ideas (Tarde 1895, p. 171; 1902a, p. 5; Chapin 1928, p. 340–341; Powell 2017). One early example is the creation of a new local government form: the city manager plan (Chapin 1928). SIs today are “usually new combinations or hybrids of existing elements” (Mulgan et al. 2007, p. 5). Phills et al. (2008), who have ten examples of recent SIs, remarked that “many of the best recognized social innovations, such as microfinance, are combinations” (p. 39). “As a consequence of this cross-pollination, a host of SIs have emerged” (Phills et al., 2008, p. 41) (e.g., responsible investing [SRI]). Further, they discuss cross-sector (nonprofit, government, and business sectors) dynamics and/or cross-pollination (fertilization) through three mechanisms of SI: exchange of ideas and values, a shift in roles and relationships (e.g., state taking more collaborative roles, such as partner and supporter), and the integration of private capital with public and philanthropic support (blending sources of models [business models and delivery]).

5. Conclusion

The centrality of concepts such as invention and imitation (repetition), as well as the lack of an explicit definition of innovation, may have obscured Tarde’s theoretical ideas on innovation. Tarde had ideas, many of which still help us understand changes taking place at the micro (individual initiatives) and meso levels (imitative repetitions). It is important that the categories of political and law innovations covered today are sorted under the SI label. However, Tarde had a broad conception of innovation, covering political (government), cultural (arts, language), and economic (industry) phenomena. He used the terms innovation and SI interchangeably to cover a wide range of “social phenomena” (1890, p. 2). Together, this leads to the conclusion that Tarde offers a theoretical framework for invention, imitation, and social impact and change (as a result of imitation, opposition, and adaptation). This framework is relevant to SI and public sector innovation.

Since Tarde can be seen as an early theoretical father of SI studies, future studies could more generally explore or use his (innovation-related) ideas more deeply and broadly. Keywords and themes to investigate include the role of individual initiatives in invention, the role of social status and fashion, the role of identity, the imitation–innovation process, replacement (or adaptation) of ideas (when two imitations collide), and adaptation. Also, two other areas for future studies could be suggested. Long before others, Tarde put forward the theoretical concept of combination (e.g. Schumpeter, Nelson and Winter). Today, this term covers what is called hybrids (see Mulgan et al. 2007; Phills et al. 2008) and recombination (Padgett and Powell 2012). Further, the term is relevant to understanding new technology (e.g., iPhones), new governance and organizational structures (the city manager form of local government, crowd-based organizing), new forms of finance, and so on. For example, crowd-funding is a kind of mashup of charitable fundraising with a venture capital mindset (Powell 2017). More exploration of the theoretical concept of combination could be conducted. Finally, Tarde focused to a limited extent on implementation. This theoretical discussion has focused little on his theoretical ideas of opposition (1897; 1897/1899) and adaptation (1897/1899). These concepts may be relevant in relation to implementation. Tarde, at least, touched upon the outcome of imitation when he talked about “perfect adaptation and perfect opposition (...) between which are countless intermediary positions” (1897/1899, p. 195).

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