

CHAPTER 11

TARDE'S HERITAGE AND THE BIOGRAPHICAL METHOD IN SOCIAL RESEARCH: THE CASE OF MIGRATION

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ABSTRACT

Tarde gives a preeminent place to the psychological forces of belief and desire. He is not interested in the individual but in inter-individual psychology, i.e., the relations between individual consciousnesses linked by the laws of imitation. By examining the beliefs and desires of individuals, he works at the micro-social level, in opposition to quantitative social science. What interests Tarde is the portrait of the man who is made and unmade in contact with others as well as the portrait of a society which is constantly shaped by invention, imitation, and the subjectivity of the social actors. Inspired by Tarde's tradition, biographical analysis can be used to understand recent migratory phenomena such as migrant networks, migrant-transnational family as well as the individual strategies of migrants that the notion of structure would not suffice to explain.

Keywords: Social research, Chicago school, biographical-interpretative method, migration

INTRODUCTION

Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904), who competed with Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) for the predominance in French sociology, was largely forgotten, only to be rediscovered a few decades later. Tarde draws on philosophy and metaphysics to construct a theory of society. Unlike Durkheim, he tried to understand the social from the individual's point of view. For him, the only social reality is the existence of individual consciousnesses linked to one another by the laws of imitation. Imitation acts like a wave or magnetic current, spreading from individual to individual. Tarde considers this fact to be the fundamental principle of the social fact. Imitation lies at the heart of all social life and explains both human relations and history. History is nothing other than the process by which individuals invent by imitating each other, from one civilization to the next.

Bruno Latour, in *Changer de société. Refaire de la sociologie* (2007), argues that Tarde's contribution to the social sciences was decisive, because he was able to make the human sciences independent from biology (he was against deterministic theories, for example in relation to crime: the causes of crime are to be found in the social and psychological origins of criminals, and are not of biological origin), and to show the importance of psychology in understanding human behavior.

In *Les lois sociales* (1899) Tarde states that the relationship of two persons is the unique and necessary element of social life, and always consists, originally, in an imitation of one by the other. He argues that nobody says a word that isn't an unconscious reproduction of past verbal articulations with a connection to the actual ones, that doesn't reproduce traditional gestures and formulas, through the imitation of the ancestors, and that doesn't perform any act which has not been taught nor copied from a living model. According to Gilles Deleuze, in *Différence et Répétition* (1968), Tarde is a leading philosopher and inventor of micro-sociology, that attributes to the psychological forces of desire and belief their rightful importance. In Tarde's theory, these are forces that enable individual consciousnesses or social groups

to act and imitate one another. By the notion of belief, Tarde means the credence an individual can give to a set of representations and to a particular value system. It is belief which enables imitation, and it is desire which enables invention, as belief fosters the desire, which in turn fosters the belief.³⁵⁸

THE CHICAGO SCHOOL AND BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

It is precisely with this micro-sociological approach that Gabriel Tarde -along with other sociologists such as Georg Simmel (1858-1918), Charles Cooley (1864-1929) and Georges H. Mead (1863-1931)- influenced the famous Chicago School. Tarde's social psychology was a major influence on the School's symbolic interactionism.

We will subsequently give in brief the history of the School.³⁵⁹ The Chicago School is at the origin of American sociology. At the end of the 19th century, the city of Chicago underwent tremendous expansion, growing from around 5.000 inhabitants in 1840 to 1.700.000 in 1900 and 3.500.000 in 1930, at the same time as industrialization attracted migrants from all over the world. Among them were the Poles, who were to be the research material for a major work by William Isaac Thomas (1863-1947) and Florian Znaniecki (1881-1956). They wrote a 5-volume work on the *Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918-1920). This study constitutes an important contribution since the personal life was for the first time considered a specific social domain and the concrete individual was placed at the center of the sociological research. Fieldwork, which had been the specialty of anthropologists, became a sociological practice, enabling many sociologists to study the communities of Chicago and other cities. Chicago, described as a 'social laboratory', was studied from the angle of the spatial distribution of communities and social classes. Successive waves of migrants transformed the city, while at the same time they were shaping their own space.

Regarding Thomas and Znaniecki's *Polish Peasant*, it is the situation of migrants that became the subject of the first biographical research based on written or oral biographies; with their study, for the first time, social reality was approached from a biographical perspective. Thomas and Znaniecki used mainly written material and set themselves the task of reconstructing and analyzing the changes in the life of the Polish community and how these manifested through the lives of its members. By examining the evolution of Polish migration to America in the early 20th century, the two researchers demonstrated that the ruptures in the lives of migrants were not simply the result of social mutations in Polish society or the Polish community in America. Thus, people's personal lives were seen as a proper domain of social objectivity, where a social transition was taking place, and the concrete or actual individual became the focus of sociological research interest. The above study has enabled the view of individuals not as the sole vehicles of social structures, but as actors, who try to cope with difficult situations by seeking and developing solution practices. This is what we named above 'symbolic interactionism', which starts from the idea that individuals don't conform to social facts but produce them through their interaction.

Thomas and Znaniecki (1918: 20) express this interaction in the following terms: "there are two fundamental practical problems which have constituted the center of attention of reflective social practice in all times. These are (1) the problem of the dependence of the individual upon social organization and culture, and (2) the problem of the dependence of social organization and culture upon the individual". The two researchers gave the biographical method the central role in the sociological research: "The general character of the work is mainly that of a systematization and classification of attitudes and values prevailing in a concrete group. Every attitude and every value, as we have said above, can be really understood only in

358 For more on Tarde's theory and its rediscovery, see Alliez (2009).

359 For the Chicago School history, see Cortese (1995).

connection with the whole social life of which it is an element, and therefore this method is the only one that gives us a full and systematic acquaintance with all the complexity of social life" (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918: 77).

THE BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH IN EUROPE

Although the Chicago School made use of autobiographical documents and material, a coherent biographical method was not really developed at that time. Later, in the 1950s and 1960s, the qualitative methodology and, particularly, the biographical approach were limited due to the rise of structuralist thinking and the retreat of the subject regarding the structure (Pineau & Le Grand 2002: 45). Then, after a period of intensive valorization of collective actors, there was a turn in the 1970s and 1980s towards the re-use of autobiographical documents, through oral history and biographical research. Biographies became an appropriate and effective way of thinking the interaction between individuals, groups, and society. Even though biographical research was established in the early 1970s, in various European countries (England, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Spain), it was not diffused everywhere in the same way (Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Wengraf, 2000).

An account of the development of the biographical method was given by Daniel Bertaux and Martin Kohli (1984) who, in reactivating it in Europe, approached this method by focusing on two dimensions: (a) the symbolic dimension of social life and its significance for individual life, and (b) the consideration of interviewees as source of information. This perspective would enable the researcher to study the articulation between biography as a social construct and objective everyday life, i.e. to consider biography integrated into social reality. On this point, an important distinction must be made: the expression 'life story' has replaced the term, used in the social sciences, 'life history', since the latter did not offer the possibility of distinguishing between the history lived by a person and the account, he or she might give of it (Bertaux, 1997: 6). The objective story, lived by a person, is something distinct from the account given by this same person in specific circumstances. Thus, several accounts of the lived experience of the same social situation could overcome their singularities to gradually achieve a scientific representation of the social components of the situation (Bertaux, 1997: 33). Daniel Bertaux uses life stories to assemble and analyze the experiences of people, with a view to elucidate the relationship between the particular and the general (Bertaux, 1997: 5).

In this new direction of biographical methods, the biographical-interpretative³⁶⁰ is included, strongly influenced by historical reality and especially by significant historical periods like the Second World War and the emergence of Nazism, a phenomenon that played an important role as subject-matter of research in biographical studies. On the one hand, the autobiographical approach has, thus, been able to develop and on the other hand, it seemed to offer people the possibility to rebuild their lives, giving, alongside dramatic historical events, a sense of continuity in their life course. The biographical-interpretative method combines an open and unstructured data collection with a rigorous analysis of the data. The process allows each interviewee to develop a gestalt, a main story, without being interrupted by the researcher. In the second part of the interview, once the interviewee states that her/his narrative is over, the researcher focuses on the individual elements of events through internal to the narrative questions.

360 As to the biographical-interpretative method, see: Rosenthal, Gabriele (2004). Biographical Research. In Cl. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium and D. Silverman (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice*, 48-64. Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications; Breckner, Roswitha (2003). Biographical Continuities and Discontinuities in East-West Migration before and after 1989. Two case studies of Migration from Romania to West Germany. In H. Robin, R. Miller and E. Zdravomyslova (eds), *Biographical Research in Eastern Europe-Altered Lives and Broken Biographies*, 191-209. Hampshire: Ashgate; Breckner, Roswitha (1999). The Biographical-Interpretative Method-Principles and Procedures, Annexe. In Pr. Chamberlayne, M. Rustin (Project Co-ordinators), *From Biography to Social Policy, Social Strategies in Risk Societies*, Sostris Working Paper 2, 91-104. Centre for Biography in Social Policy, Sociology Department, University of East London.

The difference of the biographical-interpretative method from other ones in the field of biographical research is that in the former a detailed analysis and interpretation of the data of one life story selected from all the narratives of the sample is carried out through consecutive stages: the presentation of the subject's biographical data, which lists the chronology of his/her real life experiences; the biographical analysis where propositions and assumptions about the life history are made, which are intended to show how the individual has built his or her life around successive or discontinuous choices; the thematic analysis in which the parts of the narrative are placed in one of three discourse forms, argumentation-evaluation-description and, last, the reconstruction of the life story is carried out, which is, in fact, the interpretation of the interviewee's discourse. Finally, there is the comparison of biographies. The comparison leads to the sociological analysis itself. This phase makes extensive use of the principles of 'grounded theory' developed by B. Glaser and A. Strauss³⁶¹, according to which the starting point of the analysis is an empirical phenomenon (in the case of this method a narrated event or a part of the text of the narrative) which must be interpreted through a more general observation initially formulated as a hypothesis.

MIGRATION AND BIOGRAPHICAL-INTERPRETATIVE METHOD

In my research on migrants in Greece (Vassilikou, 2007; 2021), I used the biographical-interpretative method to examine the phenomenon of migration and, particularly, women's migration and family. Since migrant women face situations that they are often unable or unwilling to talk about, approaching their life stories with this method enabled the decoding and analysis of their experiences. In the actual economic system that increases the chances of voluntary or forced movement of populations, it is likely that many women will leave their children behind for long periods of their lives; a significant part of the resulting instability that marks family relations falls on the shoulders of migrant women who, as we have seen in these studies, are to a large extent the main factors in conceiving a life plan for the family and maintaining its unity. These dynamics, together with new transnational practices using new media of family communication, constitute a complex habitus of contemporary migration.

Like in Thomas and Znaniecki's work on *Polish Peasant* where for the first time migrant social reality was examined from a biographical perspective, we could say that biographical analysis, inspired by Tarde's tradition, can be used to understand recent migratory phenomena such as migrant networks, migrant-transnational family as well as the individual strategies of migrants that the notion of structure would not suffice to explain. Biographical structuring is multi-relational, since it concerns and produces a web of events and choices that can be combined and continually reinterpreted throughout one's entire life; it is a means of linking the individual and society (Fischer-Rosenthal, 2000). From this perspective, the reality of situations and events is the product of the meaning they acquire in each narrative, a sense of continuity through a complex of discontinuities, interruptions and restarts, elements that characterize the multiple 'lives' that are lived over the course of the migrant's life.

CONCLUSION

Tarde, inventor of micro-sociology according to Gilles Deleuze, gives a preeminent place to the psychological forces of belief and desire. He is not interested in the individual but in inter-individual psychology, i.e., the relations between individual consciousnesses linked by the laws of imitation. By examining the beliefs and desires of individuals, he works at the micro-social level, in opposition to quantitative social science. What interests Tarde is the portrait of the man who is made and unmade in contact with others as well as the portrait

361 Glaser, Barney and Strauss, Anselm (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine.

of a society which is constantly shaped by invention, imitation, and the subjectivity of the social actors. Thus, his method makes the separation between the individual and the social non-operative.

The initial question of the biographical approach in social research is how the autobiographical documents represent social facts. The biographical structuration, which is a means of connecting the individual to society, is multi-relational because it concerns and produces a network of events and strategic choices made by the individual; these experiences can be combined and continuously reinterpreted throughout life revealing how the social actors construct the social environment in which they live as well as they depend on. Tarde's theory is thus shown to have deeply influenced the biographical approach in social science.

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