



Book Review

Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks

Tony D. Sampson

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012

Reviewed by Jussi Parikka

A Sleepwalker's Guide to Media Theory

Summer 2012 was one sort of mobilization of moods and affects, combined with massive police and military operations; of smiley faces, and emoting, of 'We all make the games' spirit, together with the revelations of poorly treated workers and beaten cyclists. I am talking of the London Olympics of course, but focusing on something other than what is usually perceived as the essence of the games – the sports: the nursing of affective moods across tubes and streets, shop windows and online, and of course other media too. One of the most striking refrains was the McDonald's campaign, which featured the various typologies of which the 'we' consists: 'the come-on come-on come-on-er', 'the flag-waving piggy-backer', 'the nervy peeker', and lots of other characters of the seeming multitude under the corporate (and GB) banner.

Perceptive theorist-bloggers such as K-Punk (Mark Fisher) combined the spirit of the Olympics with a slightly more apocalyptic vision of the Hunger Games (in reference to the novel and the film) which recognized the value of affect for the media spectacle. Observing the systematic overuse of affectively overloaded terms such as 'incredible', 'amazing', 'brilliant', 'unbelievable' (by BBC commentators), as well as the complex managed nature of sponsorship in relation to public space, Fisher slowly unravels a point regarding capital as the crucial support for culture and sports:

The point of capital's sponsorship of cultural and sporting events is not only the banal one of accruing brand awareness. Its more important function is to make it seem that capital's involvement is a precondition for culture as such. The presence of capitalist sigils on advertising for events forces a quasi-behaviouristic association, registered at the level of the nervous system more than of cognition, between capital and cultural. It is a pervasive

reinforcement of capitalist realism. (<http://k-punk.abstractdynamic-s.org/archives/011918.html>)

Fisher's point about the pervasive, milieu-like nature of capital is in direct resonance with a range of past years' theories concerning post-Fordist capital. Besides Fisher pointing towards Paolo Virno, we could as easily raise the centrality of Maurizio Lazzarato's analysis here – but also use Lazzarato to go one step back in theory history, to Gabriel Tarde.

The link between Tarde, affect-marketing-capitalism and contagion becomes one of the guiding threads in Tony Sampson's *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*. Affect is contagious, and on contagion one can build cascading and recurring sets of gestures, actions, habits and other stuff of subjectivities. In Sampson's book, the process of contagion – or more broadly 'virality' – is taken as one such abstract agency through which to investigate not only the specifically 'viral' nature of contemporary culture, but the more broadly contagious set of events, relations and structurations. Sampson has addressed, for instance, computer viruses in his several earlier writings, as well as acted as the co-editor of *The Spam Book*¹ (2009), but here he is able to mobilize a broader perspective on network culture, agency, and the non-cognitive techniques in contemporary marketing and politics. Not only about biological or computer viruses, Sampson's way of addressing the theme is to return to the 19th-century sociologist Gabriel Tarde, whose microsociology (as it was coined by Deleuze and Guattari) has again been making further rounds in university departments and publications.

Sampson's original take picks up on Tarde as a guide to map and orient through examples. The book turns out to be actually a manual of sorts to contagion as a mode of thought, and a mode of sociability, in relation to crowds. This obvious mention of crowds, and the context in which Tarde later on fitted, with other writers such as again, obviously, Gustave Le Bon, is however taken into further contexts in Sampson's smoothly written book. Indeed, crowds are not found only on the streets of emerging urban situations, as for the earlier theorists of contagion, affect and humans, but in networks too. The seemingly puzzling conflation of what looks to be a theory and methodology of biologically fine-tuned affective states is taken to be something that can actually open up the more digitally loaded situations of viral nature. It's not all digital networks, which pop up a bit later on in the book, but a mapping of a range of objects and situations in which virality is one theme in relation to affective relationality and imitation – Stanley Milgram's Manhattan experiment in 1968, the 1630s Dutch tulipomania, and a range of theorists where the attachment of affect and politics becomes clear, for instance in George Lakoff's work.

In his own earlier context, Tarde's way of differentiating from the concept of the social as pitched by Durkheim is already more often

discussed. This discussion includes of course Bruno Latour, but Sampson is also able to beautifully weave together phrases that catch, and affect, what Tarde was after in his peculiar sociology, not restricted to humans:

Tarde's epidemiological diagram involves the distribution of a non-cognitive rather than cognitive intelligence, that is, an imitative-suggestibility passed on in the collective non-conscious so that the affects of the other become etched onto the body and mind of the porous self. (p. 37)

Tarde's way of seeing the social as a transversal event that sits between the micro and the macro, and the traditional notions of the social, psychological and biological, is what distinguishes it from Durkheim's more regulatory approach, but this is not the main discussion Sampson pursues.

Virality is keen to flag up the specificity of Tarde in relation to other crowd theories, especially that of Le Bon. The crowd that 'thinks in images' is for Le Bon attached still to a more passive model of contagion. Both Tarde and Le Bon pitch how there is an autonomy of spreading that takes place in the crowd – a self-spreading tendency, as Sampson puts it – but for Tarde, the emphasis is less based on visual metaphors. Le Bon is, according to Sampson, tied to an 'inverted proto-psychoanalysis in the sense that visual representations are translated into collective dreams' (p. 62). This amounts to an idea of amalgamation of individuality into a collective body, which of course on a popular cultural level has been one of the topoi of the 20th century in general. Name a Hollywood film from the 1950s featuring aliens/communists and you are on to this theme.

As for Tarde, things are slightly different. Tarde's emphasis on imitation is here the key, but does not yet as such explain the distinctiveness of his thinking. Referring to imitation is not enough, but a further elaboration is of course needed. Sampson does a good job in explicating Tarde's idea as well as elaborating how such ideas gain relevance as different settings for the notion of the social that in both cases might start with hypnosis, and the dream. Sampson argues that whereas Le Bon still keeps intact the idea that the individual is more or less seduced into the hypnotic states of the crowd, the subject-cum-somnambulist is for Tarde already, from the start, in a state of suggestibility. This is the key as such, where Tarde avoids the slightly more negative idea of the crowd that we find in other early theorists. There is what Sampson calls a certain 'mutuality between hypnotizer and a hypnotized subject that underpins the social power relations in Tarde's diagram' (p. 91). Or in other words, still quoting Sampson, 'the relation between magnetizer and the magnetized is not preformed but emerges from reciprocal magnetizations' (p. 91).

Like Tiziana Terranova recently, as well as Christian Borch (*Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology*), have maintained, we can find ways to connect this to politics too. Sampson does not go extensively into discussions of recent events such as the Arab Spring, although he does also include references to the affect-loaded Obama-campaign as well as examples from the popular culture of marketing. Sampson is able to show that at times the not so politically oriented directions of Tarde (channelled through Latour) can actually contribute a good deal to contemporary analysis of network *politics*. Perhaps Sampson could have even articulated explicitly this politicization of some of the sociological/non-human strands that his work presents. Besides pitching Tarde as a novel kind of media theorist (against Le Bon's ocularcentric way of understanding cognition for instance), this understanding of modern urban and technological environments moves across a range of traditional disciplines. In other words, it's not just sociology but is, through Sampson, channelled as one answer to the Deleuze–Guattari question concerning modern politics: how is it to be explained that we want our own repression? Tarde's way of conceptualizing the hypnotic and somnambulist subject is to avoid projecting total passivity but to remind us that even the involuntary regimes of gestures, perception and memory – the nonstate – 'requires compliance to suggestibility' (p. 170). Suggestibility is indeed one of the key terms that emerges in *Virality* to understand the push and pull of involuntary non-cognitive regimes but topped up with the potentiality in subjects to get involved, attached, infected and participating through imitation.

At times, *Virality* gets a bit too much into literature review mode. This is very pedagogic, and useful, but does slow down the development of the original argument and thread of the book, which starts to emerge bit by bit. Sampson is a great writer, and the language itself is affective: 'bullish', 'cynical' are words that become not just descriptive but gather a force of expression in Sampson's way of mapping techniques of the non-cognitive in marketing and politics.

The most attractive themes pop up when Sampson discusses the specific *techniques* of affective capitalism and politics. Through eye-tracking technologies, functional MRI techniques mapping political moods, EEG and GSR (galvanic skin resonance) measurements we can get a glimpse of what are the more specific ways in which affective relations and predispositions – suggestibility as an embodied potential ready to be fed – are mapped onto epistemological objects, such as emotions. This shows the media technological conditioning of 'cognitive' capitalism, or perhaps more aptly, non-cognitive, affective capitalism, as Sampson argues. In this, and throughout the book, his debt to Nigel Thrift's ideas is clear.

Sampson's way of continuing into discussions of empathy, for instance in relation to US politics, is a good direction, but not entirely developed. The section remains short, and more of a teaser of more specified

arguments. The theorization of the attentive, trained subject works, and demonstrates the links from the late 19th century to the early 21st century in terms of thinking the non-cognitive subject – a theme which could be seen as resonating with some media theoretical insights, as well as such grounding work as Jonathan Crary’s *Suspensions of Perception*.

Sampson, however, works as a theorist – between media and sociological theory – and his writing has a very relevant resonance to a range of emerging perspectives. The next step is to continue to develop some of the themes of *Virality*. For instance, the affective HCI perspectives in relation to what I myself would map as cultural techniques of contemporary post-Fordist capitalism are definitely an area where strong theoretical insights into the *environing* modes of capture of affects can be mobilized in relation to the kinds of specific media and medical technologies that we get a glimpse of in this book. It’s not that *Virality* falls short of what it promised to do, but that one also ends up realizing – like a good book should make us realize – that there is so much waiting round the corner, with a range of examples and material that needs this sort of synchronizing analysis. Obviously, the rediscovery of a range of theorists from the last centuries – Tarde, Whitehead, Bergson, James, etc. – flags an interesting link being articulated on so many fronts at the moment. Or, to quote a tweet (28/9/12) from @karppi: ‘After reading Gabriel Tarde the concept of “social media” actually starts to make sense’ – that, and a range of other practices of network culture, just like Sampson’s *Virality* drawing on Tarde suggests.

Note

1. The reviewer has participated in writing projects with Sampson, including *The Spam Book*.

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