

# Beware the Rays of Imitation

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Tony D. Sampson. *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2012. 235 pp.

The cover of Tony D. Sampson's *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* incorporates the image of a flock of crows sitting on power lines, a scene with the potential to inspire the type of fear captured by films like Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). While Sampson does not examine avian behavior, emotions like fear and the encounters in which they are produced constitute an essential part of this text's overarching argument. In *Virality*, Sampson proposes that biological explanations of virality insufficiently explain the movement and effects of contagions. Metemorphosis and the work of Émile Durkheim are two such explanations that distinguish between the biological and the social in what Sampson regards as an unproductive and unrealistic manner. In contrast, Sampson balances contagions' productive opportunities with the threats that they pose by integrating these two fields. Because of this altered emphasis, *Virality* participates in a growing scholarly trend within the humanities in which researchers criticize and propose alternatives to the reification of a methodological division between biology and culture.<sup>1</sup> While dense, *Virality* treats a wide range of relevant scholarship as it presents a refreshing approach to contagion theory in what has been a stagnant area of scholarship.

Sampson presents *Virality* as a "resuscitation" of theories proposed by late nineteenth-century French sociologist Gabriel Tarde (7). By situating his argument in this way, Sampson acknowledges Tarde's relative obscurity while suggesting that *Virality* does not merely apply Tarde's social theories to contemporary networks. Instead, he brings Tarde into contemporary conversations about contagion, which account for the movement of "financial crisis, social influence, innovations, fashions and fads, and even human emotion" through networks of individuals (2). Sampson investigates the potential for politicians, computer hackers, and neuromarketers, among others, to prime social atmospheres and affect our desires. In the process, he proposes several connections between Tarde's work and that of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Sampson's readers are likely to be more familiar with assemblage theory, so this tran-

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<sup>1</sup> Research that takes a similar approach includes the "Biocultures Manifesto" written by Lennard J. Davis and David B. Morris (*New Literary History* 38.3 [Summer 2007]: 411-418) and Samantha Frost's work-in-progress *Biology for Humanists*.

shistorical pairing elucidates Tarde's infrequently discussed theories while providing a different way of understanding the function of imitation in assemblages.

The complex first chapter of *Virality* lays out Tarde's theories of the social, which are essential for understanding Sampson's argument. Within this chapter, Sampson includes a spatial representation of the rays and nodes that constitute the social field, which can be productively read as overlapping with the illustrations of scale-free networks in Chapter Three, a connection that the author could have made more explicit. Instead of considering individuals as self-contained and self-governing, Tarde argues that "subjectivity is open to the magnetizing, mesmerizing, and contaminating affects of others" (29). These others include diverse bodies and energies because Tarde refuses an ontology that assigns the greatest value to humans, as do many contemporary supporters of object-oriented ontology. Instead, Tarde presents the social as an atmosphere in which relations are constantly changing between bodies—read as nodes—in response to the imitative rays of energy that move among them. These rays produce imitative behavior like yawning or blushing that obscures the distinction between self and other as well as the origin of this behavior. An essential part of this argument is that we are largely unconscious of these currents or waves of energy because they affect us at the level of the nonconscious, which leads Tarde to argue that "[s]ocial man is a somnambulist" (13). While such a claim may disconcert us, researchers in the biological sciences would be the first to remind us that our bodies are such complex ecosystems that we are aware of only a small portion of the stimuli that we encounter.

Over the course of the text, Sampson touches on many examples of encounters with these imitative rays and the possibility for their manipulation, as with the housing bubble in Chapter Three or the videos of Lonelygirl15 in Chapter Two. In his treatment of these examples, Sampson differentiates his approach from Tarde's. While Tarde classifies these waves as accidental and capricious, Sampson supports Nigel Thrift's proposal that "Tarde may well have overestimated the accidentalness of contagion" (99). Sampson relies on this modification as he argues that many of today's technologies can be used to exploit the nonconscious movement of these rays. According to Sampson, "small events can be encouraged to become bigger contagious overspills" because we exist in "an epidemiological atmosphere that can be affectively primed, or premediated, so that imitative momentum can be anticipated and purposefully spread" (58). As a supporting example, he introduces the wasp–orchid assemblage from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. In this example, the orchid anticipates the male wasp's desire by both looking and smelling so much like a female wasp that the wasp attempts to mate with it. The wasp leaves the encounter unsatisfied, but the orchid has predicted and exploited the wasp's biological desire to achieve pollination. In this assemblage, wasps allow seemingly unthreatening actions

to be suggested to them by the orchids whose biological adaptation facilitates such encounters. Based on this encounter and others like it, Sampson defines contagion as “a convergent imitative encounter in which one assemblage captures the fragments of another’s desire” (45). He returns to this example throughout the text to distinguish his approach to social contagion from theories proposed by Gustave Le Bon, Émile Durkheim, and Charles Darwin.

Sampson waits until Chapters Two and Three to directly contrast Tarde’s approach with other well-known theories, such as memetics and threshold theory. Popularized by Richard Dawkins (*The Selfish Gene*), memetics contains theoretical weaknesses based on the metaphor created between a gene, a biological unit transmitted hereditarily, and a meme, a cultural unit transferred through social interaction. Sampson lays out five problems with this neo-Darwinian theory, including the difficulty that researchers have had locating this unit and the treatment of “the medium in which an idea is transmitted...as an inert channel” (72). His issues with threshold theory also center on “the *infectability* of the affective atmospheres” themselves (112). Proponents of threshold theory—including Malcolm Gladwell (*The Tipping Point*) and James Q. Wilson (the broken windows theory)—propose that the preferences and behaviors of certain elite individuals trickle down to others. As an alternative, Sampson advances physicist Albert-László Barabási’s research on scale-free networks, in which any node can start an epidemic based on an accidental encounter. This theory overlaps with that proposed by Tarde, which demonstrates that rather than refuting any of these theories entirely, Sampson seeks a middle ground from which he can emphasize that individuals or organizations with sufficient knowledge can affect the mood of the marketplace or the political atmosphere.

By presenting two examples of contagion in affective atmospheres, Sampson uses Chapter Four to explore the ways in which individuals or organizations can prime a community to facilitate the virality of certain affects—here, fear and love. The reader is likely to be more familiar with Sampson’s argument about fear than with his argument about love, which is one of the highlights of *Virality*. Based on an immunologic approach, fear of the other or of the unknown must be created in order to propagate the desire for heightened network security. To describe such encounters, Sampson raises the specter of the 1980s Bulgarian Virus Factory. In cases like this one, attack becomes part of a constantly circulating rumor triggering biological predispositions that can be appropriated to serve another’s purposes. Love is a second affect that makes individuals more susceptible to imitative rays; in fact, Tarde argues that love and other positive affects like faith and hope are *more contagious than* fear. We want to fall in love and also to receive professions of love; therefore, politicians and corporations can employ love as a strategy to affect the behavior of voters or consumers.

Sampson's application of Tarde's theories is insightful; however, this section could be usefully developed in a further work if he expanded upon the five political arenas in which love operates and the phenomenon that he calls "Obama-love." Here, Sampson explains that the way in which President Obama deployed love convinced voters to fall particularly hard for him just as voters' affective responses to him have now begun to fluctuate "between unrequited love and a love gone bad" (157). Prior to the 2008 election, President Obama used his published memoirs and his visible social media presence to cultivate informal relationships with voters as previous presidents had not. Based on these encounters, voters came to trust him, and by changing the country's mood, he won the election. After the election, though, this love began to sour; for many people, it turned into "open contempt," a transition that Tarde predicted (qtd. in 150). Tarde's social theories begin to explain the violent emotional fluctuations that many voters have experienced. This argument could have been further developed if Sampson expanded the details of the president's marketing strategies or analyzed narratives of encounters between voters and the president's imitative rays.

*Virality's* final chapter tracks the current trend toward neuromarketing—a discipline that employs technologies of neuroscience to read bodily reactions to certain products or messages—and its potential to affect consumer desire in social encounters. Individuals who participate in this process try "to capture the fascinations of the unconscious social medium, guiding attention to affectively primed encounters" using previously gathered data (162). Social media provide one site in which individuals and organizations are developing new ways to turn accidents in their favor. At this point, Sampson introduces technologies like eye tracking tests and fMRI, which provide what he calls more "objective measurements of eye movement, electrical activity in the brain, heart rate, and skin conductance and temperature" (177). His coupling of a nineteenth-century sociological argument with twenty first-century technology is both original and significant, but Sampson has framed scientific findings in such a way that he understates the role of interpretation in the reading of test results. While his argument has potential, it would benefit from more direct engagement with neuroscientific research on mirror neurons and feminist science studies. For example, in *The Lying Brain: Lie Detection in Science and Science Fiction*, Melissa Littlefield refutes this widespread belief "that the body provides us with objective data that do not require interpretation," a trap that we fall into when we assume that "[t]he body speaks for itself largely because the aspects of physiology being measured are not under direct, conscious control" (5). Additionally, neuroscientists like Ilan Dinstein have suggested that many factors besides the mirror neuron system contribute to imitation, and based on primate studies, they have shown that our understanding of an action's meaning is not necessarily tied to our repetition of that action. Therefore, Sampson's suggestion that the mirror neuron system is "the equivalent of human-to-human 'wireless communication'" remains premature (53).

In *Virality*, Sampson analyzes a wide range of materials, including theories proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, Teresa Brennan, Charles Darwin, Jonathan Crary, and Gustave Le Bon. Any reader of this text will gain exposure to an array of arguments cited across disciplines in addition to current methodological disputes in contagion theory. However, Sampson's argument can be difficult to locate amongst the many citations, and the book would benefit from more detailed explorations of the cultural and historical examples cited. Despite these suggestions, the book is both innovative and timely, which means that the work necessary to understand Sampson's connections will be well rewarded.

### Works Cited

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