

Imitation, Contagion, Suggestion

On Mimesis and Society

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Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| <i>List of figures</i> | ix |
| <i>List of contributors</i> | xi |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | xv |

PART I

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Introduction | 1 |
|---------------------|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 The imitative, contagious, and suggestible roots of modern society: toward a mimetic foundation of social theory | 3 |
| CHRISTIAN BORCH | |

PART II

| | |
|---|----|
| Historical roots: the rise of ICS Theory | 35 |
|---|----|

| | |
|---|----|
| 2 The mimetic unconscious: a mirror for genealogical reflections | 37 |
| NIDESH LAWTOO | |
| 3 Durkheim on imitation | 54 |
| BJØRN SCHJERMER | |

| | |
|---|----|
| 4 Mimesis as a social practice of self-education | 73 |
| KATJA ROTHE | |

PART III

| | |
|--|----|
| Adaptations: the proliferation of mimetic thought | 89 |
|--|----|

| | |
|--|----|
| 5 Market mimesis: imitation, contagion, and suggestion in financial markets | 91 |
| KRISTIAN BONDO HANSEN AND CHRISTIAN BORCH | |

2 The mimetic unconscious

A mirror for genealogical reflections

Nidesh Lawtoo

Only now does the truth dawn on us that by far the greatest part of our spirit's activity remains unconscious ...

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

What do imitation, suggestion, and contagion have in common? A historical oblivion, one might initially say. Unfashionable topics traditionally associated with hypnotic swoons, hysterical pathologies, and crowd behavior, the laws of imitation suffered in the twentieth century a fate similar to that which animal magnetism suffered in the nineteenth century. Unsupported by an objective paradigm, these subjective phenomena were quickly dismissed as magical, sometimes primitive, and often literary phantoms eventually relegated to the margins of more 'scientific' approaches to the psyche and the social.

The story of how Sigmund Freud, for instance, opened up a *via regia* to the unconscious by rejecting what he called the 'riddle' or the 'magic' of suggestion, is well known. Less known is that in the wake of Henry Ellenberger's *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (1970), revisionist histories have emerged that are, in turn, relegating psychoanalysis to a 'scientific fairytale' (Borch-Jacobsen and Shamdasani, 2012: 107). Without engaging in these 'Freud Wars', I think it is safe to say that as the scientific validity of the Oedipal unconscious is increasingly questioned in the twenty-first century, old mimetic riddles are currently returning to the forefront of the theoretical scene, informing the humanities, the social sciences, and casting a spell, once again, on the hard sciences.

This return is especially visible when it comes to topics like imitation and contagion. There is now talk of 'mimesis' in affect theory, 'simulation' in analytic philosophy, 'mimetic theory' in literary studies, 'virtual contagion' in digital studies, 'emotional contagion' in psychology, sociology, and political theory. And if developmental psychologists have shown that newborns imitate from the first hours of their life, neuroscientists claim that even our brains are thoroughly mimetic, for 'mirror neurons' generate automatic and unconscious reflexes that lead us to unconsciously mirror other people.

At least two of the topics of this volume, then, urge us to look *ahead* to new theories of imitation and contagion to rethink the foundations of psychic and social life on the basis of intersubjective, relational, and affective modes of mimetic communication that trouble the distinction between self and others. And yet, the final term, 'suggestion', also reminds us to simultaneously look *back* to a conception of the unconscious that was once dominant in the second half of the nineteenth century, had hypnosis as its *via regia*, and was based on a mimetic, rather than a repressive, hypothesis. This, at least, is what I suggested in a book devoted to what I called, for lack of a more original term, the 'mimetic unconscious' (Lawtoo, 2013).

Encouraged by the threefold topic of this volume and the Janus-faced orientation it implicitly proposes, I would like to follow-up on this line of inquiry by looking back to some of the late nineteenth-century advocates of the mimetic unconscious in order to look ahead to involuntary forms of behavioral imitation that are currently being rediscovered. I argue that a genealogy of the unconscious that has Friedrich Nietzsche as its golden thread in the labyrinth of pre-Freudian theories of hypnosis shows how the so-called 'riddle' of suggestion already points to some possible solutions concerning the unconscious reflex of imitation that is currently returning to the forefront of the theoretical scene, urging interdisciplinary theorists to develop what Christian Borch calls 'a mimetic foundation of social theory'. My wager is that the mimetic unconscious sets up a mirror to contemporary discoveries in the neurosciences and, by doing so, triggers some genealogical reflections that supplement, and sometimes even inverse, 'scientific' conclusions about the reflex of imitation central to both individual and social formation.

The reflex of imitation: past and present revolutions

Nietzsche did not write a book on the unconscious or proclaim its revolutionary discovery; as a reader of Schopenhauer, he was aware that this concept had a long history. Still, his preoccupations with unconscious forms of mimesis run through his entire corpus and bring us quickly to the root of the mimetic unconscious. If he is still often read as a 'precursor' of psychoanalysis or, more recently, of the death of a linguistic subject, it is important to remember that consistently in his work, Nietzsche thinks of himself as a 'philosophical physician' (1974: 35, original emphasis) who is extremely attentive to what he calls 'genuine physio-psychology' (2003: 53). It is thus on this immanent, psychosomatic basis that he proposes a backdoor to access the unconscious.

Nietzsche's concerns with 'physio-psychology' were untimely but not original. He was writing in the 1880s, during what Léon Chertok calls the "golden age" of hypnosis' (1993: 23), a period that, especially but not only in France, had revived Anton Mesmer's concerns with magnetic fluids in light

of what James Braid called a 'psycho-neuro-physiological' theory of hypnotism (in de Saussure and Chertok, 1979: 39). Nietzsche was not only fully aware of theories of hypnosis; as Marcel Gauchet puts it, he was also the 'most acute witness' of the 'physiological' or 'cerebral unconscious' (1992: 19) that dominated the second half of the nineteenth century.¹ Nietzsche was, in fact, a reader of Théodule Ribot's *La revue philosophique de France et de l'étranger*, an international journal that published pioneering work by prominent figures in philosophy, psychology, physio-psychology and emerging social sciences, such as crowd psychology and sociology. There Nietzsche familiarized himself with the work of Jean-Martin Charcot on 'hysteria', Hippolyte Bernheim on 'suggestion', Charles Féré on 'psycho-motor induction', and there are reasons to believe he had read articles by Charles Richet on 'somnambulism', Pierre Janet on 'automatism', and Gabriel Tarde on 'imitation', among others (see Haaz, 2002; Stingelin, 2000). This explains why the language of 'hypnosis', 'suggestion', and 'imitation' that punctuates his corpus, is at the heart of his analysis of mimetic phenomena such as mastery and slavery, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, will to power and crowd behavior, and is the fulcrum upon which his critique of a unitary, rational, and volitional 'ego' pivots (Lawtoo, 2013: 27–83).

Nietzsche's general diagnostic of this all too human tendency to imitate is that we are entering what he calls a 'phase of modesty of consciousness' (1968: 676). As he puts it in *Gay Science* (from 1882): 'Only now does the truth dawn on us that by far the greatest part of our spirit's activity remains unconscious [*unbewusst*]' (1974: 262).² In *Beyond Good and Evil* (from 1886), he specifies that 'a thought comes when "it" wants, not when "I" want' (2003: 47). And in *Will to Power*, he adds: 'we as conscious, purposive creatures, are only the smallest part of us [...] By far the greater number of motions have nothing whatever to do with consciousness' (1968: 676). These are radical claims if we consider that they precede a much-discussed decentering of consciousness in terms of a narcissistic blow which, after Copernicus and Darwin, introduces a 'revolution' in our understanding of man who is not even master in his own house. But if Nietzsche's claims are innovative, they are not fully original. He is echoing a conception of the unconscious that, while forgotten in the twentieth century, was dominant at the twilight of the nineteenth century, and is currently returning to inform how a 'contagion of affect flows across bodies' (Connolly, 2002: 74, original emphasis) along immanent lines which, as William Connolly and Jane Bennett convincingly show, 'contest' the nature/culture binary (2002: 159) at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Let us thus take a step back and recall that contributors to Ribot's *Revue* generally agreed in defining the unconscious as what lies outside the field of awareness, is involuntary, automatic, not fully conscious, and is in this specific sense, *unconscious*. For instance, Hippolyte Bernheim, from the School of Nancy, writes: 'In every-day life many acts occur automatically, involuntarily and unconsciously, on our part' (2001: 126). Shifting the

ground from personal to crowd psychology, Gustave Le Bon confirms: 'The conscious life of the spirit represents only a very feeble part compared to its unconscious life' (2003: 12). Generalizing this view to account for social life in general, Gabriel Tarde diagnoses: 'every act of perception implies a form of habit, that is an unconscious imitation' (2001: 135). And here is how Théodule Ribot himself, sums up the general view described in the *Revue*: 'If we count, in every human life, what is due to automatism, habit passion, and especially imitation, we shall see that the number of acts that are purely voluntary, in the strict sense of the term, is quite small' (1888: 177). Nietzsche was indeed in good company when it came to promoting a view of the unconscious based on physio-psychological reflexes that are automatic, mimetic, and, as he says, inaugurate a 'phase of modesty of consciousness' (1968: 676).

And yet, this modesty did not prevent philosophical physicians to diagnose the physio-psychological principles that trigger motions, as well as emotions, that operate under the soil of consciousness but can be brought to consciousness nonetheless. How? By developing 'a psychology of movements, or better, a psychophysiology', as Ribot says in an article in *Revue* (1879: 372); or, as Charles Richet specifies, by considering '*the muscular sense as the road [la voie] through which a great number of unconscious phenomena become conscious*' (1879: 614; Richet's italics). Nietzsche was fully aware of that muscular road to the unconscious. As early as in 1878 he writes in *Human, All Too Human*:

Imitation of a gesture is older than language, and goes on involuntarily even now, when the language of gesture is universally suppressed, and the educated are taught to control their muscles. The imitation of gesture is so strong that we cannot watch a face in movement without innervation of our own face (one can observe that feigned yawning will evoke natural yawning in the man who observes it).

(1997: 216, 129)

Nietzsche does not use the concept of *the* unconscious here, but his account of 'imitation' (*Nachmachen*) describes gestures and facial expressions that are 'involuntary' (*unwillkürlich*), are not under the control of awareness, and provide a clear manifestation of the mimetic unconscious. For Nietzsche, in fact, the unconscious and imitation are two sides of the same coin. And this Janus-faced coin flips our common understanding of what is both *mimetic* and *unconscious* upside down. On one side, *imitation*, in its most basic, physio-psychological manifestations, is not based on a conscious, volitional action that stems from the ego but on an unconscious reflex reaction triggered by the other, especially exemplary others – what Pierre Janet will later call a *socius*. On the other side, this unconscious is not based on a repressive or linguistic hypothesis to be discovered within a singular subject but on a mimetic hypothesis that is attentive to affects that flow in-between subjects

engaged in a relation of inter-cerebral communication – what Gabriel Tarde will call the 'fundamental problem' (2001: 263) of the *social*.

Nietzsche's mimetic hypothesis has not received the attention it deserves in the past century but is currently being confirmed in our own century. Writing in the late 1870s, Nietzsche is in fact describing what has been hailed as a revolutionary discovery in the mid-1990s. Thanks to the accidental discovery of a new class of neurons called 'mirror neurons' by Giacomo Rizzolatti and his team doing experiments with macaque monkeys and later with humans as well, neuroscientists now claim they can offer an empirical grounding to explain why such an unconscious facial 'innervation' is so strong that mimetic reflexes cannot be suppressed (Gallese, 2011; Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia, 2008). Mirror neurons are, in fact, motor neurons, that is, neurons responsible for movements that are activated not only as we perform gestures, but also as we observe others performing gestures, especially goal-directed motor acts sequences and facial mimicry, though not only that. The simple fact of watching someone grab something or facially express an emotion, Rizzolatti and his team argue, causes mirror neurons to discharge or 'fire' as if we ourselves were performing that gesture or expression, generating an unconscious tendency to mimic it.

The parallels with Nietzsche's observation are striking. Marco Iacoboni, for instance, one of the neuroscientists who relied on brain imaging techniques like functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) that confirm a 'mirror-neuron system' (MNS) in humans as well, writes that 'mirror neurons fire when we see others expressing their emotions, as if we were making those facial expression ourselves' (2008: 119). Along similar lines, Vittorio Gallese, one of the original discoverers in Parma writes: 'When perceiving others expressing emotions by means of their facial mimicry, the observer's facial muscles activate in a congruent manner' (2011: 95). And Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia confirm this point: 'there is no doubt that our motor system mirrors the facial movement of others' (2008: 188). These mimetic reflexes, neuroscientists explain time and again, happen involuntarily, are below conscious awareness and take place at what they call an 'unconscious' level. Thus, when Iacoboni says that mirror neurons generate 'an *effortless*, automatic, and unconscious inner mirroring' (2008: 120, original emphasis) or, as Gallese writes that mirror neurons are 'automatic, unconscious and pre-reflexive' (2005: 41) and generate an 'unconscious mimesis' endowed with a 'pre-social character' (2012: 94) neuroscientists are reopening the untimely *voie* that leads from muscular movements back to the mimetic unconscious – reframed as an empirically based, immanent, and timely discovery.

If the presence of mirror neurons in humans has now been confirmed by single-neuron studies (Mukamel et al., 2010), its broader implications concerning the specific role the MNS plays in empathy, understanding, language acquisition, and social evolution have not failed to generate controversies and are still being debated.³ Still, despite the diverging *interpretations* mirror neurons will continue to generate, the presence of a MNS in humans

is a neurological *fact* that encourages renewed collaborations between the humanities, the social sciences, and the hard sciences. These collaborations are underway and are fostering a renewed interest in imitation as a phenomenon having 'important implications for our understanding of ourselves, both individually and socially' (Hurley and Chater, 2005: 1; see also Garrels, 2011). There are thus good reasons to look ahead to new scientific research on imitation and contagion that is currently challenging the myth of an autonomous, original, and volitional subject. And yet, since humans have been known to imitate for a long time, there are also good reasons to look back to a longer tradition concerned with *Homo mimeticus* to bring a longer genealogical perspective to bear on the psychic, social, and philosophical implications of this discovery.⁴ It would in fact be more historically correct to say that these discoveries are important and ground-breaking empirical *confirmations* of a mimetic hypothesis that has been relegated to the back-stage of research in the twentieth century, and is now center stage again in the twenty-first century. Let us look at it more closely.

Since the study of mental pathology was considered the bedrock for the development of a scientific psychology in the late nineteenth century, patients suffering from hysteria provided initial case studies for a diagnostic of unconscious or, as Pierre Janet preferred to call them, 'subconscious' mimetic tendencies. For instance, in *Automatisme psychologique* (1903), Janet called this tendency, also known as echopraxia, '*specular or mirroring imitation [imitation spéculaire ou en miroir]*,' for 'the subject usually imitates with his left arm the movement we make with our right arm, resembling our image in a mirror' (1903: 18).⁵ Hippolyte Bernheim in *Suggestive Therapeutics* (from 1889) argued that not only hysterics, but all healthy subjects are vulnerable to hypnotic forms of mimicry, which he grounded in what he called a 'spontaneous unconscious imitation of the brain' (2001: 127). And Gabriel Tarde, in the *Laws of Imitation* (from 1890) puts it even more explicitly as he bases his account of social life as a whole on the mimetic realization that 'in the nervous system there is an innate tendency to imitate' (*il y a dans le système nerveux une tendance innée à l'imitation*) (2001: 148). And quoting the British physiologist Henry Maudsley, Tarde speaks of 'an *unconscious imitation* (imitation inconsciente) of the attitude or expression of the person whose muscular contraction *he copies instinctively and with precision*' (138, original emphasis). Mirroring imitation, involuntary innervation, unconscious imitation: the terminology changes but the mimetic phenomenon remains essentially the same, and confirms the idea that theorists of the mimetic unconscious were, indeed, 'untimely', in the Nietzschean sense that their observations were ahead of their times, as they rooted the mimetic faculty in physio-psychological reflexes that originate in a mirroring brain.

And yet, being untimely comes at a price. As Bruno Latour points out in his genealogical efforts to reclaim Gabriel Tarde as the 'grandfather' of actor-network theory, the latter 'could not transform his intuitions into data, because the material world he was interested in was not there yet to

provide him with any empirical grasp' (2002: 118). This is certainly true at the level of his macro-analysis of social and 'technological networks' based on instantaneous mimetic communications characteristic of a global, interconnected, and 'virtual' world Tarde so perceptively foresaw. But is it really true of that 'cerebral,' 'inter-cerebral,' or 'hypnotic suggestion' in which 'nerve imitates nerve; brain imitates brain' (Tarde, 2001: 264) on which Tarde based the laws of imitation? Interesting the so-called *magical* tradition that relied on hypnotic suggestion as a *via regia* to the unconscious comes close to providing, if not a solid, at least an empirically grounded grasp of the mimetic principles that are currently being rediscovered by the neurosciences and the social sciences.

Could it be, then, that suggestion, which was for such a long time considered a riddle to be left behind, already looked ahead to theoretical solutions to the problem of what Tarde called unconscious, inter-cerebral imitation? This is what Borch implies as he writes that 'suggestion might prove more analytically fruitful than its bad reputation suggests' (2012: 301). Nietzsche, as we turn to see, offers a confirmation of this mimetic hypothesis as he urges genealogists to revisit the psychomotor power of suggestion.

The power of suggestion: psychomotor induction

In his physio-psychological observations, Nietzsche is quite explicit about inscribing the *physiological* reflex of imitation in *psychological* theories of hypnotic suggestions, opening up a genealogy of the mimetic unconscious that is as past-oriented as it is future-oriented. In late texts like *The Case of Wagner* and *The Will to Power*, for instance, Nietzsche reframes his early concerns with the unconscious imitation of gestures in the context of the theories of hypnosis and suggestions we have begun to unearth. Speaking of theatrical spectacles, he says for instance that art 'exercises the power of suggestion over the muscles and senses' (1968: 809). Switching to one of the theater's typical mimetic affects, he adds: 'Empathy with the souls of others is originally nothing moral, but a physiological susceptibility to suggestion' (809). And thinking of the case of Wagner as a 'master of hypnotic tricks', Nietzsche states his suggestive power is 'merely a product of [a] psychomotor rapport' (809). Hypnosis, suggestion, rapport. Here we find a confirmation that Nietzsche had been reading Ribot's *Revue* carefully. But if he is a faithful advocate of the hypnotic tradition, Nietzsche is also providing his own distinctive rearticulation of competing schools of hypnosis.

As the references to 'suggestion' indicate, Nietzsche relies on Bernheim, of the School of Nancy, to give psychological substance to his *psycho*-physiological diagnostic of the mimetic unconscious. A medical internist by training, Bernheim claimed, *contra* the Salpêtrière School, that hypnosis was not a pathological nervous condition reserved to hysterical patients, but that all subjects, even educated and, he specifies 'very intelligent' people, are characterized by what he calls 'susceptibility to suggestion' or, more

simply, 'suggestion' (2001: 5, 15), by which he means 'a peculiar aptitude for transforming the idea received into an act' (2001: 137, original emphasis). Suggestion, for Bernheim, is thus a psychological notion akin to influence. For instance, suggestion accounts for patients in a hypnotic sleep who have an automatic tendency to imitate the doctor's movements and turn their orders into an act: 'Lift your arm!' orders the doctor, and, *voilà*, the arm goes up involuntarily, as the caricature of Bernheim's theory often goes. But if one takes the trouble to read Bernheim, it is clear that the distinction between consciousness and the unconscious is far from being clear-cut. Imitation, for him, takes place at different levels of awareness, and one does not need to be a mindless automaton in a state of deep somnambulism in order to be under the sway of suggestion. Hence his replacement of the notion of hypnosis (from *hypnos*, sleep) with the one of suggestion.⁶ As he puts it, our thoughts, ideals, tastes, emotions, 'may be suggested to our minds by others, and they are sometimes accepted without being challenged' (2001: 131). This claim offers a serious challenge to a rational, volitional, and autonomous conception of the subject; yet if you think of the ways in which opinions, fashions, tastes, desires, and all kinds of cultural habits are formed, it may account for a disconcerting mimetic phenomenon central to social life.

This was, of course, Gabriel Tarde's point. As he noted, 'we are not born similar; we become so' (2001: 131–2). How? Via an unconscious imitation transmitted from 'brain to brain' (257, n1) that operates on Bernheim's model of suggestion. As Tarde puts it: 'to have only suggested ideas and to believe them spontaneous: this is the illusion characteristic of the somnambulist and of the social man' (2001: 137). Hence, he sets out to trace the 'contagious' fluxes of imitation that, at different speeds, are at play in 'fashion' (*imitation-mode*), 'customs' (*imitation-coutume*), 'beliefs' (*imitation des croyances*), and desires (*imitation de désirs*) that can be 'conscious' or 'unconscious,' based on 'internal' and 'external' models (2001: 247–57). Tarde's social evaluation of mimetic behavior, as Andrea Brighenti persuasively shows, resonates with a minor tradition of theorists who 'resisted disciplinary specialization,' like Canetti and Deleuze (Brighenti, 2011). At the same time, the concept of suggestion has fared less well among dominant trends in social theory (Borch, 2012); it has been responsible for discrediting authors who rely on this mimetic tradition, and it even marked a break between the school of Nancy and the school of the Salpêtrière, generating rivalries that will contribute to dissolving interest in *both* hypnosis *and* suggestion in the twentieth century.

But perhaps Nietzsche can help us see that the quarrel between the two schools is not as clear-cut as it appears to be and that if joined they can both contribute to grounding the current revival of interest in suggestion on the physio-psychology of the mimetic unconscious. Notice, in fact, that Nietzsche speaks of '*physiological* suggestibility to suggestion' as well as '*psychomotor rapport*' joining, once again, physiology with psychology. This should not be dismissed as a simple contradiction, or as a

misunderstanding of a psychological notion (suggestion) for a somatic one (hypnosis). As Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, one of the most incisive recent advocates of Bernheim's theory of suggestion, writes: 'The contrast between the somatic theory of hypnosis advocated by the Salpêtrière School and the psychological theory of the Nancy School is actually much less than it appears for they are both rooted in one and the same psycho-physiology' (2009: 110). Nietzsche fundamentally agrees. Hence his fluid oscillation between the physio-psychology at play in these rivalrous schools. And in a mirroring move, he adds a diagnostic supplement to this fundamental realization.

Nietzsche's move is subtle, not fully explicit, and requires genealogical attention to what Foucault calls the 'most unpromising places' to be brought to the fore (1977: 139). But the move is insidious, grounds the mimetic unconscious in a materialist hypothesis, and there is something to be gained for *both* hypnosis *and* suggestion in this mirroring psycho-physiological operation. Schematically put, *with* the School of Nancy, *contra* the Salpêtrière, Nietzsche stresses the suggestibility of all subjects opening up his diagnostic of the mimetic unconscious to the *psycho*-physiological sphere of emotions, art, culture, and politics; conversely, *contra* the School of Nancy, *with* the Salpêtrière, he focuses on the *psycho-physiology* responsible for the specific mirroring effects of motor inductions. And revealing his genealogical source of inspiration, Nietzsche specifies that this '*induction psycho-motrice*' is indebted to what 'Charles Féré thinks' (1968: 809, original emphasis).

Who, then, was Charles Féré? And what does he think? Schooled at the Salpêtrière as an assistant of Charcot, Féré was particularly interested in measuring the physio-psychological effects of movements on sensations. In a book aptly titled, *Sensation et mouvement* (from 1887), Féré noted that 'the sight of a movement determines, among certain subjects, the necessity to reproduce them' and sets out to define '*induction psycho-motrice*' as 'the automatic reproduction of movements that we see performed' (1900: 87, 123, original emphasis). On the basis of this psychomotor observation, he redefines suggestibility as the 'capacity to accept an idea communicated directly or indirectly by words, gestures, or by whatever sensorial stimulant' (1904: 337). We are thus back to what has become familiar territory since the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s. But notice that in the 1880s it was not obvious to register, let alone determine the cause of this bizarre claim. There were, in fact, good reasons to simply dismiss it as pathological. For instance, Féré could have diagnosed this mirroring feeling as a relative rare *physiological* pathology characteristic of hysterical patients prone to unconscious mimicry (Charcot). Alternatively, he could have considered this mirroring induction as the effect of a *psychic* suggestion in which the patient consciously or unconsciously simulates the movements he or she is expected to perform (Bernheim). Instead, Féré, opens up a middle route as he senses that in matters of physio-psychology it is more productive to join, rather than divide, forces. Thus, he considers that this activation of the feeling of

the other in the self is indicative of a 'psycho-motor induction' which involves both psychic and physiological levels of suggestion.

An advocate of experimental psychology, Féré actually sought to measure the force of suggestion with the help of a dynamometer, an instrument for measuring power, or as Nietzsche will call it, will to power. As Féré reports in a book on *Animal Magnetism* (1888) co-authored with Alfred Binet, here is how they proceeded. They first attempted to induce in the patient a motor act, such as the act of clenching the fist, with a verbal suggestion, that is, by ordering the patient: 'Clench your first!' Then, in a second moment, they performed the gesture in front of him. Here is what they find out: 'verbal suggestion,' they write, 'only augments his normal dynamometric force by a few degrees, but if the action of firmly clenching the fist is imitated before him, his muscular force is not merely increased but doubled'. Conclusion: 'the suggestion given by gestures gives more intense results than it is possible to obtain by words only' (1888: 180). As the authors readily acknowledge, this is a rudimentary experiment; yet it already registers a mysterious mimetic supplement generated by the perception of a goal-oriented movement that doubles the power of verbal suggestion. Féré and Binet attributed this mimetic supplement to the suggestive force of psychomotor induction; now neuroscientists attribute it to the MNS. Still, the diagnostic is basically the same and confirms that what used to be called the psyche and now is called the brain responds mimetically to the perception of movements.

Now, if the experiment is historically interesting, the theoretical speculations triggered by the experiment are even more so. On the basis of this mimetic reflex, Féré, paving the way for Nietzsche and Tarde, offers the following solution to the riddle of how we access the emotions of others, the so-called 'theory of mind': 'If we can read the thought of one's interlocutor on his face, it is because while we observe him, we unconsciously assume his expression, and the idea presents itself as a consequence' (1900: 16). Unconscious mimicry of an affective expression gives rise to a conscious insight into the thought of others; *sym-pathos* paves the way for a shared *logos*. And in a speculative mood, he specifies:

It is possible that certain subjects who are particularly sensitive to the phenomenon of induction imitate unconsciously [*imitent inconsciemment*] the movements that necessarily accompany the idea of the one in his presence, and will consequently be led to feel the same emotion, the same thought, in a word, to obey what we call *mental suggestion* [*la suggestion mentale*].

(1900: 16)

For Féré there is thus a direct path that leads from the reflex of imitation of movements to the psychic life of the other. For him, communication is first of all an unconscious, bodily, and mimetic communication in which the automatic reproduction of movements leads to an immediate understanding

of the other's emotions and thoughts. Conversely, he adds: 'the *communication of thoughts* is only a *communication of movements* and *mental suggestion* reduces itself to a *suggestion via mimicry* [*suggestion par la mimique*]' (1900: 123, original emphasis). Nietzsche, always bolder in his theoretical speculations, generalizes this mimetic hypothesis as he echoes: 'One never communicates thoughts: one communicates movements, mimic signs, which we then trace back to thoughts' (1968: 428).

Contemporary neuroscientists may smile at experiments with a dynamometer but they are likely to take his theoretical conclusion seriously. Marco Iacoboni, for instance, writes: 'For centuries, philosophers scratched their heads over humans' ability to understand one another. Their befuddlement was reasonable: they had essentially no science to work with' (2008: 4). And then he proceeds to rely on fMRI studies of mirror neurons to debunk the twentieth-century idea that we necessarily need to know the reasons of the other's feelings in order to empathize (or theory theory) with the more recent realization that we unconsciously mime the expressions of the other and that leads us to a direct understanding of the other (or simulation theory). For Iacoboni in fact, 'we understand the mental states of others by simulating them in our brain, and we achieve this end by way of mirror neurons' (2008: 34). Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia confirm this point as they say that a 'mirror mechanism [...] permits our brain to immediately understand what we are seeing, feeling, or imagining others to be doing' (2008: 190). If mirror neurons are currently receiving much attention, it is thus not only because they reveal an unconscious reflex at the heart of subjectivity, but also because they may be at the source of how we access other people's minds, emotions, and intentions in an immediate, unconscious, and embodied way – which is what the tradition of the mimetic unconscious had been saying all along.

This genealogy of the mimetic unconscious, then, brings us back to where we started. But we are now in a position to see that looking back to the riddle of suggestion was actually a way of looking ahead to solutions neuroscientists are currently rediscovering. There is now growing evidence that unconscious imitation is constitutive of subject formation. Mirror neurons are indeed found to be operative in newborns who respond to facial expressions immediately after birth – records ranging around 42 minutes (Meltzoff and Moore, 1983) – and urge us to rethink subjectivity in relational, intersubjective terms from the very beginning, along the lines Nietzsche and Féré, and later Pierre Janet and George Bataille, had already suggested (see Lawtoo, 2013: 260–80).

For thinkers of mimesis, it is in fact because the subject is open to a relation of mimetic communication with a privileged other (or *socius*) such as a parent from the very first hours of life that they remain open, for better and worse, to the suggestion of exemplary figures in adulthood – be it friends or lovers, teachers or leaders. Susceptibility to suggestion in adulthood, in other words, rests on this primary receptivity to the mirroring influences in

childhood that bring the self into being as a relational, embodied, and plastic creature. The subject is thus, in this fundamental sense, already a *social* subject for it is the product of unconscious, intersubjective, and mimetic communication in which the distinction between the subject and the *socius*, self and others, and, by extension, the psychic and the social, is porous at best. If only because the social is constitutive of a mirroring subject that is already plural – always unconsciously affected by a multiplicity of others.

And yet, this mirroring genealogy of the mimetic unconscious is double-faced. If one side shows that the MNS supports the validity of the psycho-physiology of ICS, the other side indicates that theories of ICS can help us supplement cognitive approaches to mimesis along lines relevant for broader social, cultural, and political concerns. In order to bring this brief genealogy to an end, I schematically flesh out some of these reflections, more as starting points for further developments, than as actual ‘conclusions’.

Mirroring reflections (and inversions)

Epistemic Reflection: In the wake of the discovery of mirror neurons in monkeys, Iacoboni, Rizzolatti, and others designed a series of experiments to better understand the role of the MNS in coding intentions in different contextual situations for humans. Experiments show, for instance, that mirror neurons are more active if the subject watches someone grab a cup of tea in the context of a table laid for breakfast than in the context of a messy table that needs clearing (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia, 2008: 125–31). The implication being that the MNS is neither activated by the object alone nor solely by the gesture of the subject but, rather, by the goal or intention that, in a specific social context, motivates the gesture. So far so good.

But what about the context in which, not the object, but the *subject* of the experiment is located to objectively measure the neural response to such actions? Let us recall that in a fMRI machine, absolute stillness is the rule as the subject lies horizontally, sometimes for hours, in a state of psychophysiological relaxation, while at the same time fixing its gaze on a series of images. Genealogical lenses make us wonder: isn’t this, quite literally, an ideal position to induce what we could call a light hypnotic trance? That is, a state in which, the same theorists who first intuited the presence of mirroring reflexes in humans noticed, one is by definition more susceptible to suggestion and thus prone to unconscious imitation? I do not mean to imply that mirror neurons are *only* active in light hypnotic states; only that the subject whose neurons neuroscientists are seemingly *objectively* measuring is also a *subject* who responds mimetically to the environment in which he or she is immersed – and quite unconsciously so.

Metaphysical Reflection: We have seen that contemporary neuroscience emphasizes the active role mirror neurons play in the process of cognition and ‘understanding’, this being, as Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia put it, their ‘primary role’ (2008: 124, original emphasis). Mirror neurons are thus said

to ‘read intentions’, ‘understand emotions’, ‘acquire language’, in a pre-reflexive, immediate and unconscious way. Féré and Nietzsche had reached similar conclusions. And yet, they also reminded us that the mimetic unconscious problematizes the very notion of a rational, monadic and volitional subject. This point is worth recalling. Notice, in fact, that the MNS tends to perform the transitive activities that used to be attributed to the old category of the ‘subject’: mirror neurons not only ‘fire’, but also ‘read’, and above all they ‘understand’. Such a ‘faith of grammar’ (2003: 47) as Nietzsche would have named it, calls for some suspicion for it may still bear the traces of a monadic, rational, and autonomous subject (call it ego, man, or neuronal man) who is considered as the cause of predicates, such as reading, coding, and understanding. Could it be that behind the novelty of the MNS still lurks the shadow of what Nietzsche calls ‘that famous old “I”’ (2003: 47)?

Perhaps. Let us thus not forget Nietzsche’s diagnostic claim that we are entering a phase of ‘modesty of consciousness’ (1968: 676, emphasis added), a phase in which herd behavior, docility, credulity, automatism, lack of awareness, suggestibility, and irrationality are *also* manifest symptoms of unconscious imitation. The mimetic subject might read other minds in the lab, but in the real world we might also fall prey to the power of social suggestions we do not even see – let alone read, or understand – yet inform, conform, and transform our behavior nonetheless.

Artistic Reflection: The last observation is far from original. Since classical antiquity imitation, or as it was once called, *mimesis*, and irrational behavior have been intimately related. This is perhaps the reason Nietzsche speaks of ‘an *ancient* association between movement and sensation’ (1986: 89, emphasis added). He was thinking of Féré but when a philologist specialized in classical antiquity says ‘ancient,’ he usually means what he says. Nietzsche is, in fact also thinking of Plato’s critique of the power of mimesis in general and theatrical mimesis in particular in fueling irrational affects that spread contagiously in the theater. This is an unpopular critique, which is usually dismissed as a tyrannical, perhaps even totalitarian, exclusion of literature from the ideal city.

But is it only that? I can only briefly recall that when Plato critiques the irrational and contagious emotional effects of poetry in Book III of *Republic*, his target is not poetry in general but *mimetic* poetry, by which he means *theatrical* spectacles that were actually performed, and thus embodied – not read. The target of Plato’s critique of mimesis is specific. It addresses a type of dramatic speech (*mimetic lexis*) in which the actor does not narrate what a literary character did in the third person (*diegesis*). Rather, the actor (or *mimos*) impersonates his character, that is, he mimes his role, not only in ‘speech’ but, as Socrates specifies, in ‘bodily bearing’ (1963: 638, 393c) as well. It is thus not simply mimetic *speeches* Plato critiques, but the mimetic *movements* and *expressions* these speeches generate in the actor, and, at an additional remove, in what Plato called ‘the mob assembled in the theater’

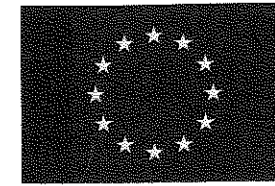
(1963: 830, 604e). Why? Nietzsche, thanks to Féré, knows the answer: because the force of a *verbal* suggestion is doubled by the presence of a *psychomotor* suggestion. Ancient philosophers blamed this contagious effect on mimetic *lexis*, modern psychologists on psychomotor induction, now we can blame it on mirror neurons, but the message remains essentially the same and is that mimesis is the *medium* of affective contagion.

Political Reflection: crowd psychology emerges in the late nineteenth century precisely to address the problem of contagious mimesis that already preoccupied Plato, and it does so via the model of hypnotic suggestion. Gustave Le Bon, for instance, argued that unconscious imitation in the crowd does not lead to cognitive acts, but to irrational, violent, and highly contagious acts. To be sure, Le Bon's theory was haunted by the specter of socialism and, in the past century, was generally dismissed for its ideological bias. Still, with the history of the twentieth century behind us and the rise of new fascist leaders ahead of us, there are good reasons to return to the insights of crowd psychology. This is especially urgent since contemporary neuroscientists turned social theorists argue that the solution for a 'healthy democracy [...] consists in mechanisms of empathy and identification between the people and their political representatives' (Iacoboni, 2008: 243). While empathy between leaders and suffering people remains much needed, indeed, the times seem ripe to remember that mirroring identifications between suffering people and their leaders can easily backfire depending on the model who is imitated. If our genealogy of the mimetic unconscious taught us anything, it is that mimesis cannot be prescribed only as a cognitive therapy, for it simultaneously work as an irrational pathology – or, as Plato called it, as a *'pharmakon'*.

To conclude these mirroring reflections, Gabriel Tarde, offers a lucid reminder in *The Laws of Imitation* that could perhaps serve as a springboard for future inquiries to rethink the social on the basis of a newly confirmed image of *Homo mimeticus*. Speaking of an 'inter-cerebral action at a distance', which has been our primary concern to diagnose in this chapter, Tarde defined it as nothing less than the 'elementary and fundamental problem that social psychology must try to resolve' (2001: 262). This is perhaps why he immediately adds that social psychology 'begins where physio-psychology ends' (262). Ending on that note might well be a modest way to suggest that we can now finally begin.

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Notes

- 1 Given the centrality of imitation in Nietzsche's physio-psychology, it seems worth to qualify this 'cerebral' unconscious as *mimetic* to stress its relational, socio-cultural, and aesthetic orientation.
- 2 References to the German editions are from Nietzsche (1967–77).
- 3 While initial skeptics questioned the existence of a MNS in humans, the most recent critics claim that 'there is no theoretical pressure to abandon the idea that mirror neurons support imitation in a broader sense of associations between actions, as in observational learning' and focus on the role social 'context' plays in 'unconscious mimicry' (Hickock, 2014: 199, 203). For a concise and informed confrontation of the main challenges to the concept of mirror neurons, see Ramachandran (2011: 312–14, n2).
- 4 *Homo mimeticus* is the title of an ongoing ERC-funded research project of which this chapter is a part. For initial outputs see Lawtoo (2017a,b, 2018).
- 5 Unless specified otherwise, all translations from French are those of the author.
- 6 Bernheim retains the notion of hypnosis to designate 'an exalted susceptibility to suggestion induced by an influence exercised over the subject's imagination' (2001: 17).

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