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An Interview with Tony David Sampson: Author of *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*

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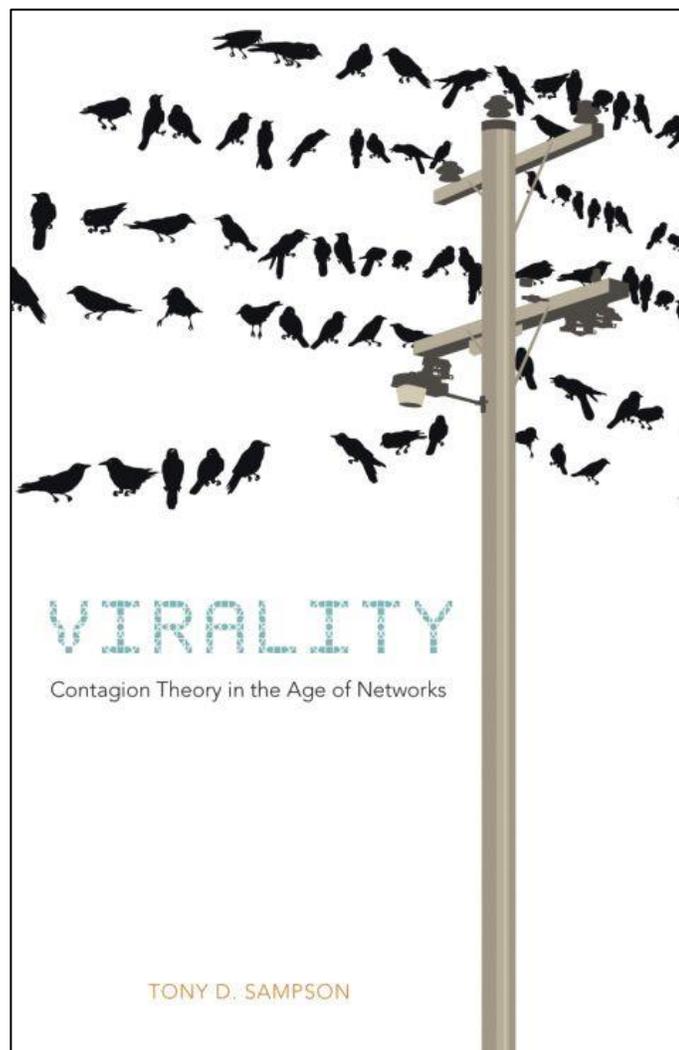
Abstract: In this interview with Tony D. Sampson, guest editors Tara Robbins Fee and Samuel B. Fee touch on issues of imitation and contagion—a loaded term unpacked in Sampson’s 2012 book *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*.

Keywords: virality, contagion, networks, Tony David Sampson, originality

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Tony D. Sampson is Reader in Digital Culture and Communication in the School of Arts and Digital Industries (ADI) at the University of East London, where he directs the EmotionUX lab, supervising research on the cognitive, emotional, and affective aspects of user experience. In 2013, he co-founded Club Critical Theory, an organization dedicated to the application of critical theory in everyday life in Southend-on-Sea, Essex. Tony is the author of *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* and *The Assemblage Brain: Sense Making in Neuroculture*, both from the University of Minnesota Press. He blogs at viralcontagion.wordpress.com.

We are delighted to have the opportunity to talk with Tony about how his work touches on issues of imitation and contagion—a loaded term unpacked within his 2012 book.



Sam Fee: Tony, your book *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* seeks to explain networking behaviors that you argue have too often been inadequately captured in representational language. You propose that such language inaccurately describes human

interaction in terms of identities and productions of resemblance, while assemblage theory offers a better way of describing behavior in terms of social encounter. First, could you describe for *NANO* readers how you believe that representational thinking falls short in describing the sociality of networking?

Tony D. Sampson: The problem with representation is absolutely key to understanding the social theory offered in *Virality* and my current work in *The Assemblage Brain*. The specific point made in *Virality* is that as a social concept virality needs to be decoupled from representational approaches that tend to limit examples of social and cultural contagion to their resemblances to biological spreading phenomena. When examples of non-biological spreading phenomena become analogous to biological contagion, the focus falls too much on (a) a discursively posed fear of contamination and desire for immunity, and (b), a neo-Darwinian biomechanism imposed on social and cultural processes. These are, evidently, powerful discursive forces, but I argue that virality has the potential to describe so much more about new kinds of connectivity in the age of networks than those stirred into action by biologically hardwired fear and neo-Darwinian logic alone. This is why I revive Gabriel Tarde's nineteenth-century crowd theory to try to understand the network age. His social laws (imitation, repetition, opposition and adaptation) locate contagious forces as pivotal in the production of social reality.

Although virality does more than represent the biological world in non-biological contexts, it's important to add that I'm not ignoring the role of biology in social and cultural processes. Instead, I attempt to collapse the distinction to a point where there might not need to be a distinction at all. That is to say, there are complex intersections between cultural and social forces and biological tendencies in virality. My focus falls instead on affective propagations, prediscursive, nonrepresentational and relational viral encounters. For example, I write about the affective viral capacities of empathy for new idols that crop up from time to time, like those that emerged during Obama's election in 2008. In this case, emotional images of the Obama family posted online on the eve of his election helped to spread positive feelings toward the new president across the globe. For many of us at the time I don't think we responded in an entirely rational way to so-called Obama love, but instead experienced it as an affective joyful encounter that made us feel like change was going to happen. The same kind of process is perhaps happening today with Trump, but whereas Obama's virality felt like an encounter with active joy, Trump's virus seems to thrive on a mixture of joyful passivity, anger, and fear.

It's interesting to note that Tarde regarded love as a far more powerful vector for contagion than fear. So there's still hope. Both are nonetheless examples of the indeterminacy of what I call viral events.

The point is that social spaces of propagation are where culture and biology get swept along by ongoing events. Indeed, it's the event itself that is viral, not necessarily the things that are *infected*. The outcome of this approach is twofold. On one hand, we encounter a kind of Whiteheadian (following Alfred North Whitehead) concept of social space that is not about the spatial location of bodies and things that interact with each other. On the contrary, social space is all about interaction or encounter in itself. This is loosely based on Whitehead's *actual*

occasion—the event. On the other hand, then, I wanted to move away from focusing on things *in space*, inscribed with meaning and signification, to look at things *in relation* to events.

Sam Fee: Could you offer a brief explanation of assemblage theory and tell us how it presents an alternative to understanding the sociality of behavior from the molecular level outward?

Tony D. Sampson: My use of assemblage theory is of course just one interpretation among others. It is characterized mainly by it being heavily infused with Tarde's social theory of imitation. It is used to intervene in two prevalent and historically entrenched tendencies in social theory. The first tendency is to produce social categories and levels (micro/macro, individual/collective and interpersonal, group, mass etc.). Assemblages allow us to look at what traverses in between these social clusters. In a nutshell, the social is grasped as a process of repetition and differentiation, which produces social reality rather than fitting reality into these neat categories. Assemblages are always open to events that can sweep up a micro level interaction (e.g. the passing on of a rumor say from one person to another) and transform it into a crowd or network contagion. Likewise, viral events can disperse crowds or networks into smaller groups or isolated individuals. Again, in my work assemblages are used to conceive of the social *in relation* to events. The ebb and flow of a political campaign can be looked at in this way. Strategists will of course try to steer voter perception by way of tapping into feelings and emotions, and they can rely on, to some extent, voters imitating the opinions of others that influence them in this way. Yet, as much as they try to prime the mood (the affective atmosphere) of the campaign, these strategists cannot completely control the accidents that occur in relation to events. As my latest work points out, the priming of affect is becoming increasingly resourceful via social media, big data and neuro-technologies, but the imitative trajectory of a rumor, for example, is difficult to determine.

The second tendency concerns a contested notion of emergence theory. Here I think Tarde is an early assemblage theorist in the way he challenges Durkheim's social emergence theory in which an emergent social whole (the collective consciousness) transcends the interaction between parts. On one hand, with Durkheim it's always the social whole that determines these parts. Accordingly, social interactions are generally shaped by the dynamic density of the social whole we are born into. On the other, Tarde's social monadology argues that the whole is nothing more than a bigger part. Rather than wholes then, we might think of social clusters as a molecular clump of interacting parts or a temporary molarity that brings parts into relation while always being open to the affective force of events.

To summarize, the main focus of assemblage theory for me is on social relationality and encounters with events. Tarde's theory adds an interesting way of thinking about how the social comes together through imitative encounters.

Tara Fee: How does assemblage theory help us to understand notions of originality? Does a philosophical commitment to assemblage theory carry with it a rejection of originality as a concept?

Tony D. Sampson: From within the Tardean sociological frame I used in *Virality*, it probably makes very little sense to talk about finding an essential kind of originality: a model, that is. Firstly, what is created and copied from social examples (as Tarde refers to them) becomes linked to a complex collective process of imitation. Tarde talks only of imitation and the imitation of imitation. The essence of the social is not the example that is copied, but the accumulation of imitation itself. Even if there were an original example in his work somewhere (and I can't recall one), it would be impossible to find it in amongst all these accumulations; these whirlpools of contagion. It would be like trying to trace the origins of DNA to the outer edges of the universe.

Secondly, and more importantly perhaps, finding an original model from which copies are made is a badly posed question for a Tardean assemblage theory. This is not to discount originality altogether though, but to instead think in terms of an original process. As follows, there are ontological commitments in both Tarde and Deleuze to a social process that is repetitive, but also produces difference or adaptation.

This focus on repetition and adaptation is why Tarde is so closely aligned to, and evidently, a profound influence on Deleuzian ontology. The production of reality is similarly not grasped through a model/copy relation. We need to forget, as Brian Massumi reminds us, about the kind of simulacra that Baudrillard proposes. With Tarde and Deleuze we find no such thing as a one-off model of reality or indeed a series of resemblances that destroy this real model.

On one hand, the model/copy relation assumes nothing more than a difference by degree. It's the passing on of the *same* thing with slight variations. The neo-Darwinian meme does this too by mapping gradual evolutionary changes. It is therefore possible to go back and find the real model from which these variants sprang. Baudrillard's simulacrum similarly expands on this approach by developing a model/copy/copy/copy/copy *ad infinitum*. Although the original implodes under the weight of so many copies, there is still a commitment to it; even if it is destroyed. But again, by looking at this from an event theory perspective, we don't find an essential real buried under copies because the spreading of things is the process that produces the real. Copies are not spawned by an essential model, but are produced by way of a creative process that endlessly repeats and differentiates. So this process of imitation, on the other hand, is not just about differences by degree, but the production of novelty and potential that might tip over into a difference in kind. It is the production of reality open to change.

Similarly, Massumi calls the copy or imitation of a thing a mere way-station before a new kind of thing emerges from the event. So the answer to the question: is there an original is, following this logic, yes and no. No original model, but yes, perhaps an original process!

Recently I've been thinking through this idea of an original process using the career of David Bowie. In the popular media Bowie has been presented as a one-off; a model rock star with so many imitators, but he was famously a magpie artist. Magpies are not originals; they are co-producers of reality.

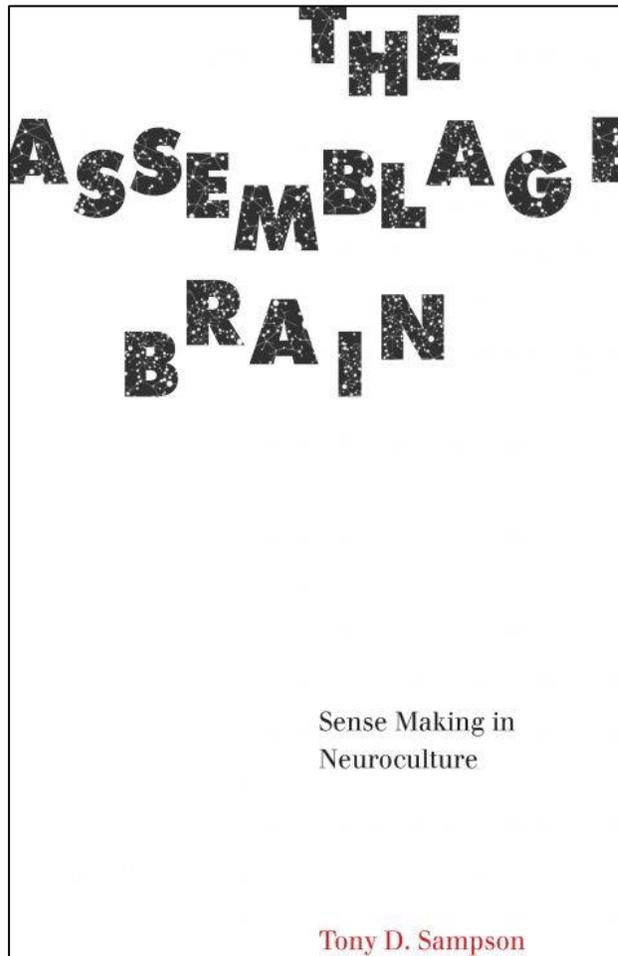


Tribute to David Bowie by artist Eduardo Kobra. 837 Jersey Avenue, Jersey City NJ. 2016. [Photo by Sean Scanlan]

The magpie artist fits well with Massumi's reading of Deleuze's two processes of simulacra. To begin with, he is this way-station of imitation. He is captured by the topological relations that condition his style and music. Massumi calls this first simulacrum a surface "network of resemblance" (4). This is not a model/copy relation, but the actions of this process of reality. Bowie is caught up in a topological grid of cultural reference and exchange points—becoming standardized by his sensory environment. This is, in Deleuzian terms, the process of repetition or a refrain that repeats a pattern. Arguably, Bowie's early career is initially constrained by this refrain. Later on though, the production of reality differentiates. It does not destroy reality—producing empty signifiers; it instead breaks out of the tendency toward repetition. It "turns against the entire system of resemblance and replication" as Massumi puts it (5). This is what magpie artists like Bowie participate in. They go with the adaptive forces; pilfering what gets passed on, repeated and imitated until a threshold is met. Bowie was an important artist, not because he was the original model—a one-off—but because he cleverly tapped into the processes of art he encountered. He explored what potential comes from the imitation of his sensory environment. I suppose he stands out because he went beyond the way-station that

many less successful artists get stuck at. His work, like his idol Andy Warhol, disrupted the flow of repetition and opened up the refrain of Pop Art to novel lines of flight.

Sam Fee: How does your forthcoming book *The Assemblage Brain: Sense Making in Neuroculture* articulate the formation of knowledge?



Tony D. Sampson: I'm not sure I go as far as to set out a complete theory of knowledge formation. My work has always been more ontologically rather than epistemologically oriented. But yes, by applying assemblage theory to brains there are some unavoidable conclusions to be made. As above, sense making is treated as relational, so I reject emergent cognitive wholes or indeed a model of collective consciousness inherited from Durkheim. In the case of the former, *The Assemblage Brain* intervenes in the often assumed emergence of a phenomenal model of the self, which (a) is similarly treated as an emergent whole that somehow transcends its parts, and (b) involves a strange distinction between the inner and outer worlds of relational experience; that is, the external world is often seen as nothing more than an image experienced on the inside. This returns us to the problem of representation and a Platonic model of the cave-brain: a brain that can never have access to the real world.

The initial focus of the book is however about contrasting two Deleuzian brains. On one hand, there are the discontinuities and mixtures of the Rhizome brain we find in *A Thousand Plateaus*. This earlier brain closely follows some of the anti-reticular declarations of the neuron doctrine established in the nineteenth century. On the other, I look more closely at the brain that plunges into chaos in *What is Philosophy?* This later chaos-brain, although far more problematic to those of us who were attracted to the philosophy of mixture in the earlier work, actually raises some really interesting concerns with regard to possible differences in the way philosophers, artists, and scientists may think about the world. This is not a neuron-centered viewpoint. I'm not talking about structural or locatable differences between the brains of philosophers, artists, and scientists. But rather, I'm concerned with a difference in kind in sense making in relation to how philosophy, art, and science confront the endless possibilities of chaos. Moreover, the book suggests a number of ways in which these different sense-making capacities can interfere with each other. According to *What Is Philosophy?* there are many limitations to the extent to which things can mix, but what I end up doing is drawing on current neurocultures in philosophy, art, and science to produce interferences as a kind of methodological approach. It is here, in these often-constrained interferences, where I find the politics of neuroculture, particularly as philosophy, art, and science intersect with what I call neurocapitalism.

Tara Fee: What views of the role of culture and/or sociality are challenged by the neurological science in this new book?

Tony D. Sampson: My aim in the first part of the book is to ask *what can be done to a brain?* For example, I take the emotional brain thesis—made popular by Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux—and show how it has informed new modes of efficiency analysis in the digital workplace. This trend in the neurosciences has greatly influenced commercial design theory, marketing, and notions of what constitutes the so-called user experience. As follows, developments in emotional design and neuro-web design play a part in situating digital subjectivity as mostly unconscious or rather nonconscious. One interference I offer in this context is that of a revitalized Antonio Gramsci confronting a kind of neuro-Taylorism running through the history of human computer interaction. This is a series of paradigmatic shifts in which a worker's brain, once free from the physical labor of the factory, becomes captured in neurocapitalism. Another revives the aesthetics of Aldous Huxley's dystopic fiction to explore the extent to which neuropharmaceuticals and the introduction of neurotechnologies in education and marketing coincide with Deleuze's control society thesis.

The second part asks *what a brain can do*. This is a combined political and philosophical exploration of sense making. In the former case, I return to Tarde's nineteenth century neurocultures of the somnambulist (the sleepwalking subjectivities of the crowd that resonate so well with the mostly nonconscious subjectivity situated in current neuroscience) and compare it to recent political events. At the time of writing the rise of rightwing populism in Europe, particularly UKIP in the UK, was a pertinent example of emotional and feely appeals to parts of the electorate that ultimately lead to Brexit. This sleepwalk into a disempowering joyful encounter was of course evident in Trump's campaign in the US. My project engages with an ongoing question concerning an alternative neuroculture; that is, what does it take to wake up

the somnambulist who seems to unconsciously imitate these feely encounters with a mode of politics that will ultimately have a negative influence on their lives.

The philosophical and political come together with the problem of locationist tendencies in neuroscience where brain imaging science is crudely applied to locate regions or structures implicated in sense making linked to political preference, creativity, and even gender difference. What we end up with is a kind of neurophrenology which has been purposefully misappropriated by certain politicians to blame a dysfunctional society on sensory deprivation brought about by bad parenting rather than dire economic conditions. The book therefore traces a tradition of anti-locationism through Tarde's panpsychism, Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, and Deleuze's notion of *The Fold*.

It is here with Bergson's anti-locationist stance that *The Assemblage Brain* returns to the problem with representation. The problem for Bergson is that, on one hand, the idealist creates a world full of objects that exist only in the mind and for the mind's sake only. They are the shadows on Plato's cave wall. I call this the problematic cave-brain. It's the brain Thomas Metzinger uses in his phenomenal neurophilosophy. Bergson's point is that objects do exist independently of the consciousness that perceives them. However, on the other hand, real objects do not materialize outside of our experience of them. That is to say, we cannot separate the experience of objects from the production of color via the eye and brain, for example. So our sense making of objects is more than the idealist's representation and less than the realist's real thing. So in between representation and the real thing we find what Bergson calls the *image*. The brain and body are images, matter is an image. Everything is an image. The brain's encounter with matter is that of an image encountering another image. This is pictorial, but there's no magic representational image in between or beyond the material relation between images. Why should we assume that because objects appear to us pictorially they also exist as a magic representation in the mind or exist outside of experience?

This is not to say that we do not think transparently. Brain processes seem to work so that the perception of matter appears coherently to us. It is like a filtered experience of reality, if you like. Deleuze says the brain is like an umbrella that protects us from the endless possibilities of chaos. Perhaps this is because objective reality is too much to take in? The endless possibilities of the events encountered are just too chaotic. But this transparency does not mean that the images we perceive exist, as realists might say, outside of experience, in the real. Images are not independent of each other's experience. Of course, the world appears to us as coherent. It's just that there's no need for a phenomenal separation between images or indeed, a world of images that have a place in reality unknown to us. This is something that science tends to do very well for us. We can start to see through brain transparency with science. Yes, sense making seems to be *in* "consciousness" as a kind of first person phenomenal state of encounter, but there is not necessarily a phenomenal location in the brain that contains a storehouse of these images as representations or indeed a self-image. Neuroimaging has not discovered this photographic store in the brain.

So in place of the kind of representational world conjured up in semiotics and acts of signification, or indeed metaphorical language, wherein objects seem to be inscribed with representational meaning, *The Assemblage Brain* looks instead for the material relationality between objects—how, that is, one image encounters the other. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, it is not the person, but the brain that thinks. We are brain matter in constant duration with matter we experience.

Tara Fee: How, then, should your work reconstruct a layperson's understanding of imitation as a form of social relation?

Tony D. Sampson: Imitation is, at the same time, a cultural inclination and biological tendency. It is arguably more important to the development of our sense-making capacity than language. Indeed, without the imitation of language there would be no semantics by which we could make sense of the world. Indeed, this sense of self we describe to our self and experience as somehow being *inside us* (our identity) is perhaps just a product of imitating what's out there in our sensory environment.

This tendency to imitate makes us vulnerable to what we encounter in sensory environments that are increasingly mediated to us through a digital culture managed by marketers, experience designers, and political strategists informed by neuroscience. This makes us open to adaptations that are mostly beyond our control. There is, as such, a need to make sense of new forms of neuropsychology that seem to exploit what Tarde called *imitation-suggestibility*; that is, a mostly nonconscious tendency to imitate and pass-on what is suggested to us.

Understanding how we become situated as subjects in neurocapitalism requires us to grasp that it is not just us, but our social relations that are being steered and put up for sale. Social media businesses like Facebook are already manipulating our shared emotional experiences and evidently engaged in trying to make these experiences become contagious. Indeed, recent efforts by Facebook differ from older methods of advertising. Marketing today is no longer simply engaged with appealing to our conscious sense of self identity. What is being mobilized is the mediating force of shared experience—an experience of the other and the sensory environments in which social encounters take place. It is these experiences that are passed on. It's the somnambulist!

Finally, I think it's important to realize the power of our sense-making capacity to discern between fearmongering and the often joyful encounters we have with marketers and politicians. Both of these contagions have the potential to disempower us, but I think we are more easily fooled by our encounter with joyful experiences.

Tara Fee: Are there particular technologies that you perceive as more generative of the kind of sociality described by assemblage theory? Or does all technology inevitably produce this sort of sociality because it is in the nature of humans (and the technologies they use) to do so?

Tony D. Sampson: Well, yes to the second point, to some extent. There's been a great deal of excitement around Tarde's revival and his work's relevance to the current network paradigm. This is not, however, because he anticipated the internet, but because he helps to develop an understanding of how imitation is generative of the social. So yes, virality didn't start with the internet. Whether or not it's a crowd or a digital network, these kinds of contagion spread through the social: they produce it. After all, a crowd is a network and network is a crowd. Technologies just seem to speed up and intensify this tendency to imitate, pass on, and differentiate.

Tarde also provides a nice counterpoint to the extension of the Durkheimian concept of collective consciousness to the internet model. There was a lot of cultural optimism surrounding the idea that a smart collective cognition could emerge from the component parts of the network. This is how the computer/mind metaphor of cognitive science became the mega brain of the internet age in the late 1990s. I much prefer to apply Tarde's cultural pessimism to the age of networks; that is to say, rather than being a collective consciousness, the social is a network of mostly nonconscious associations.

With regard to this being solely about human nature, that's a different question. I'm more interested in the processes of relational encounter than I am human nature. I'm not an essentialist in that sense.

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