

Archives of the Arctic. Ice, Entropy and Memory
Sept. 18-20, 2013
Berlin, Germany

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After nature. Life on ice and the network society in Gabriel Tarde's Fragment d'histoire future

The world of Isaac Newton was 5600 years old and had undergone no major changes since creation. The age of discovery, from Columbus to Copernicus, had expanded space enormously; Newton discovered the laws which enabled this enlarged space to be systematized, but he knew little of time. If the renaissance discovered space, the long nineteenth century discovered time; historical, evolutionary as well as geological time. The renaissance utopians Thomas More Francis Bacon, Tomas Campanella and others travelled in space, to new unknown islands in the Americas. Starting with Mercier's *L'An 2440, rêve s'il en fut jamais*, published in 1771, both science fiction writers and political utopians travelled through time, into the future. They did so using historical time frames, describing new modes of government, educational institutions or means of production. Or they employed evolutionary time frames wherein human biological material is improved and perfected. Gabriel Tarde's 1896 novel *Fragment d'histoire future* (known in English as "Underground man") is a rare example of travel also in geological time. With the discovery of geological time, notably the ice ages, and the fashion for thermodynamics, the fear of climate change became widespread in the late nineteenth century. In his fable the philosopher and sociologist Tarde skillfully exploits these fears. The first part of the novel describes the realization of a utopia of natural reason in the form of a one language and one state cosmopolitan order for mankind. With technology and science is perfected, illness and poverty is overcome, while principles of eugenic selection are discretely introduced to allow for the gradual perfection of the human race. The author shows this utopia to be flawed. Yet final destruction does not come from within. The sun falters, causing temperatures on earth to decline. Glaciers expand and oceans freeze until the earth becomes a gigantic snowball. Bringing what could be saved from the libraries and museum of the global capital, a small group of people go underground and build a new civilization, drawing on heat from the earth and chemically produced oxygen and food. Climate change has transformed the earth into an immense archive of deep frozen life forms that in turn provide blueprints for a new virtual world of networked technological mediations. In this non-spatial world of simulations, humans carve out a future.

Tarde's vision has been influential in popular culture, thus in the 1990s the Wachowskis drew freely on the Frenchman's fable for their films on *The Matrix*. Despite the resurgent interest in Tarde's highly original philosophy of repetition and difference, since its enthusiastic rediscovery

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in the work of Gilles Deleuze, Eric Alliez and Bruno Latour, there has so far been little scholarly interest in *Fragment d'histoire future*.

Tarde's fable is a thought experiment meant to bring out the key ambition of his sociology, that of mentally isolating a purely social domain in order to make it the object of scientific analysis. Yet there seems to be more and other in the poetical allegory than in the social theory it is supposed to illustrate. Tarde describes a situation in which there is no longer such a thing as nature; no animals, germs, plants, no sky, oceans or landscapes. The natural sciences blossom, but only as studies of reproductions, notably electronic simulations. The social order is decentered, political capitals unthinkable, since here are no territories to control. Humans live in time alone; history has no outside. With space turning virtual, and thus archival, the fable becomes a reflection on time and memory. Future post-natural man lives in his underground ateliers within an intentional second order cultural archive, drawing on a non-intentional first order natural archive; the ice-clad earth.