7 The height, length and width of social theory

Alberto Corsín Jiménez

This chapter examines what is at stake in trying to make sociology and its objects (the social, society, sociality) assume an ontological form. This holding of social theory accountable to ontology, I want to argue, involves its own very peculiar anthropological imagination: the making of social analysis and social knowledge into proportionate (sometimes, even, commensurable) objects for one another.[1]

Gabriel Tarde has captured anew the attention of social theorists for his provocative and original inversion of the ontology/sociology equation. As the conventional history of the discipline has it, whilst for Durkheim 'society' was an ontic reality demanding explanation (through ritual, collective consciousness, etc.; see Robbins' and Jenkins' chapters, this volume), for Tarde 'every thing is a society' (Tarde 2006: 55) and thus sociologically ontological. In an early overview of the new Tardian anti-sociologism, David Toews draws out the terms of such an ontological turn:

> The new discourse on Tarde involves an exploration of social ontology that presents itself as alternative to basic Durkheimian premises, in particular as an alternative to the idea of the existence of a social species which is supposed to transcend the contingency of social and political history and provide a foundation for the social science.
>
> (Toews 2003: 93)

Notwithstanding their apparent opposition, however, I want to suggest that both Durkheim and Tarde shared in fact some 'ontological' premises in how they went about crafting and putting together their arguments. The chapter suggests that Tarde's, like Durkheim's, and indeed like much social theory thereafter, remained a proportional sociology; a theory that called upon itself to have a particular kind of magnitudinous character – a particular kind of height, width and social length.[2]

To make the effects of proportionality visible, I shall introduce my subject matter by way of an ethnography of the disproportionate. This is a slightly odd formulation, because part my argument here will be to claim a special status for ethnography as a technique for describing the disproportionate. The ethnography looks at a management and architectural consultancy project I participated in and researched in Buenos Aires during the year 2007–8, dedicated to designing the 'knowledge environment' for the new regional headquarters of one of the world's

largest oil companies (hereon, Petrolco). I shall focus on one particular process within this larger project: that of counting the total number of employees that were scheduled to move to the new building in October 2008. Early on in the project the population to be moved was estimated at 2000 people. The chapter describes how the final Number 2000 was produced.

Briefly put, my claim here shall be that the 'management of knowledge' – in this case, the process of producing the Number 2000 – functions as an anthropological category of our times because of its very capacity at dislocating the knowledge/social equation. There is, I want to suggest, a form of disproportionality between 'knowledge' and 'social life' in contemporary managerial environments (and, for that matter, much social theory) that takes 'knowledge management' as its central organizing trope. As I intimated above, it is the disproportionate claims set on 'managing knowledge' that makes 'knowledge' and 'the social' appear commensurable. Said differently, it is through disproportionate descriptions that the knowledge/social equation becomes visible in contemporary social and managerial theory (Corsín Jiménez forthcoming).

Disproportionality

My use of the term 'disproportionality' is partly inspired by Tarde's sociology. In fact, it is in dialogue with Tarde's dis/proportionate sociology – with the playful ambiguity that the proportion plays in Tarde's thought – that I will try to make my argument carry its force.

It takes no stretch of the imagination to justify Tarde's disproportional sociological thought. In *Monadology and Sociology*, for instance, he speaks of 'every living species' tendency to multiply geometrically', of the 'propensity towards universalisation of every reality … hence the spilling-over of variations that penetrates and takes hold of every physical and social being' (Tarde 2006: 99).[3] All objects and agencies, he says, are animated by 'rhythmic vibrations' and 'overflowing revolutionary differentiations' (Tarde 2006: 78, 80) that feed on each other to create constant displacements of the social, constant residualizations.[4] Moreover, for Tarde, every element carries within itself an ontological destiny, a desire of totality to become 'the incarnation of a cosmic idea' (Tarde 2006: 95). It is hardly surprising, then, to hear Tarde close the very last sentence of *Monadology* with an apology, asking his 'dear readers' to 'forgive [the] metaphysical excess' he has incurred throughout the book (Tarde 2006: 106).

However, notwithstanding his beautiful excessiveness, I want to suggest here that Tarde's sociology remains, at bottom, a proportionate sociology. In many respects this is unavoidable, because it would have been almost impossible for Tarde to establish himself as a sociological thinker in the nineteenth century without stabilizing his theoretical imagination. It is well known that Tarde was writing at one of the most important periods in the history of the natural sciences, when one after another biology, chemistry or physics went through radical paradigm changes, opening- up new abysses at the very heart of our ontological categories. Thus, Andrew Barry and Nigel Thrift write that 'The social according to Tarde

was … understood through an analogy to geology, chemistry or astronomy' (Barry & Thrift 2007: 512) The exuberance of the natural sciences impregnated Tarde's sociology, who mixed and borrowed concepts and arguments from various disciplines indistinctively. 'When Tarde wishes to present the best case of what he has in mind when analysing human societies,' writes Bruno Latour of the Tardian method, 'it is always history of science that comes forward' (Latour 2002: 126) The question of scale, for instance, which dominated much natural ontology at the time, takes hold in Tarde's descriptions of the folding of the universe through his phenomenal excursions out to the astronomical and back into the microscopic. Indeed, in his descriptions of the properties of monads, Tarde often indulges in spiralling flights of excess, travelling instantaneously the distance from the organic to the cosmological in a single argumentative gesture. As David Toews has put it, 'for Tarde, the existence of innovative variation [was] veritably a matter of metaphysical linkage with every movement in the universe' (Toews 2003: 86). However, as wildly disproportionate as these excursions often appear, in the last instance, when Tarde moves to lend his argument a human scale, he regularly ends up stabilizing his imagination around a proportionate figure of sorts. For example, there is a passage in one of Tarde's many scalar flights in *Monadology and Sociology* where he describes the dyalitical process through which differences differentiate themselves into the infinitesimal. For Tarde, no object or agency is ever pure, that is, stable and in equilibrium; changes are always taking place at one or another of an entity's many ontological layers, regardless of whether we have evidence for them or not. He speaks of such changes, invisible to our empirical senses, as 'infinitesimal inhabitants of mysterious cities, so far from us' (Tarde 2006: 84). In a footnote, however, he expounds on the notion of distance:

> I say 'far from us' for two reasons: because of the incommensurable distance between their smallness and our relative immensity, and inversely, their apparent eternity in relation to our insignificant existence; and because of the profound heterogeneity of our (theirs and ours) intimate natures.
>
> (Tarde 2006: 84)

I find this passage fascinating because its terms are almost identical to those of a famous statement by Galileo Galilei who, towards the end of his life, when he was bedridden by his blindness, is said to have remarked: 'I who enlarged the universe 100,000 times am now shrunk to the size of my body.' The resonance intrigues me because confronted with an expansion of their ontological imaginations, with the exponential recession of the natural limits of the cosmos and the physical world around them, both men resorted to the same image of proportionality to stabilize the accounts of the changes which they were witnessing. Yet this is no loose coincidence. The image is found yet again in the writings of no lesser figure than Kant, when in the *Critique of Practical Reason* he writes,

> The [starry heaven] view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates … my importance as an animal creature … The [moral law within me], on the

> contrary, infinitely raises my worth as that of an intelligence by my personality, in which the moral law reveals a life independent of all animality and even of the whole world of sense.
>
> (Kant 1788 [1956]: 166)

The latter image is in fact invoked in the very same terms by Tarde himself, when in the opening pages of *Social Laws* he states that

> the first herdsmen who scanned the starry heavens, and the first tillers of the soil who essayed to discover the secrets of plant life, must have been impressed in much the same way by the sparkling disorder of the firmament, with its manifold meteors, as well as by the exuberant diversity of vegetable and animal forms.
>
> (Tarde 2000 [1899]: 7)

Kant, Galileo and Tarde all appeal to a relation of magnitude – a figure of proportionality – to render intelligible the new world of possibilities opening up before them. Whatever sense of ontological robustness they were each hanging on to, it was in all cases summoned in the shape of a relation of proportionality. In the light of these cases, one is almost tempted to speak of the proportion as a fundamental anthropological category of western modernity.

There is one last proportional excursion described by Tarde in *Monadology* that I would like to comment on. There is a passage in the book where he confronts a criticism often made of one of his central theses, namely, that all life forms interact in a manner that is essentially sociological, and that this sociological dynamism cuts across all ontological levels. Tarde's opponents argue that not all life forms have symmetrical forms. Nations and societies, for instance, extend over territories that are often shapeless and irregular, with no clear boundaries, whilst all living organisms, his opponents argue, have clearly bounded morphologies (Tarde 2006: 57). Tarde summarizes their argument by saying that in their view, an 'organism's height, width and length are always in proportional relationship to one another' (Tarde 2006: 58). For Tarde, however, those who take sides with this kind of symmetrical argumentation fail to understand that human societies' symmetrical orientation is deployed along different orders of reality. One only need look at China's 'social aggregation', which 'extends 3000 kilometers long and wide, and only one or two kilometers high, since Chinese people are all short and they build low houses' (Tarde 2006: 58). Chinese society displays a form of sociological proportionality that is adapted to their territorial and environmental conditions, and the same is true of human societies everywhere: 'Everything in our social world … is symmetrical and regular' (Tarde 2006: 60). Indeed, it is the proportional stability – the balance of ontological accounts – afforded by symmetry that justifies 'every possibility's tendency towards realization, every reality's tendency towards universalization … towards the netting out of its characters' (Tarde 2006: 99).

In the rest of this chapter I would like to describe in some detail one of the examples used by Tarde to justify the netting-out of ontology, that is, its ultimate

proportional form. His example concerns the height of human societies. The example follows his argument about the size – the height, length and width – of Chinese society. He writes that it is only natural for societies to seek higher altitudes, 'to build ever higher houses … because this satisfies a widespread human need, that of participating of the social advantages that go with concentrating the largest possible amount of people in the smallest possible amount of space'. The only reason why this 'vital instinct for sociability' does not develop to the full is that 'such a high-rise nation would surpass the atmosphere's utmost limit for breathing, at the same time as the earth's crust would find itself incapable of supporting the pressures exerted upon it by such vertical growth' (Tarde 2006: 58–9).

The rest of the chapter reflects on just such a Tardian concern with the netting-out of ontology in sociological proportions; said differently, with the ontology of the social, and in particular, the ontological terms of social theory itself. Tarde's revival in sociology involves just such 'coming-into-terms' of sociology with its own modes of description and analysis: an enquiry into the process of how and where to look for the sociological in descriptions of social life. For Tarde, as noted above, ontology itself is a sociological project, hence his famous dictum, 'every thing is a society' (Tarde 2006: 55).

The ethnographic example I want to focus on concerns the case of a 'high-rise society', in terms not unlike those imagined by Tarde himself. From September 2007 to September 2008 I worked and carried out fieldwork in an international management consultancy firm (which I shall hereon refer to as Innova) researching and designing the 'knowledge environment' of one of the world's largest oil company's new headquarters in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In Buenos Aires, I worked along a team of ten people, including architects, engineers, consultants and graphic designers, whose task was to design a new 'office culture' for the company's new purpose-made 34 storey building. The original plan made provisions for c.2000 people based in a variety of office locations in Buenos Aires to move to the new building in October 2008. One of the main tasks of the project's team was to come up with the definite number of people who would be moving to the new premises as planned. What follows is the story of how the Number 2000 was produced.

Ecologies of work

Innova brands itself as a consultancy firm specialized in 'workplace strategies', aimed at bringing together expertise in the physical, technical, social and organizational systems of a company to design tailored 'ecologies of new ways of working' (Becker 2007; Becker et al. 1992). Examples of such ecologies are so-called non-territorial offices, hoteling, collaborative team environments or home-based telework (Becker et al. 1993a; Becker et al. 1993b). When I arrived to the project in September 2007, Innova had already been working on analysing the oil company's 'work culture' and 'work processes' for several months. Out of this work, Innova's analysts had developed three scenarios, each modelling and proposing a new corporate approach to the organization of work. Central to all models was the analysis of the spatial dimensions of work. Innova's strategic approach to 'work

cultures' revolves around the question of 'where' people work. For Innova, knowing where one works is important because it is around the spatial dynamics of work that they construct what they call indices of 'mobility' and 'flexibility'. Simply put, these indices measure a company's ratio of spatial occupation; that is, how many square metres are occupied by how many people. This is of course directly reminiscent of Tarde's argument apropos of the 'vital instinct of sociability', where human creativity is said to be at its highest if 'the largest possible amount of people [are concentrated] in the smallest possible amount of space'. However, unlike Tarde, at Innova they do not think that spatial concentration leads directly to human creativity. What they do think is that creativity and innovation are the products of spatial dynamism. As they put it themselves in their brochures and documents, 'the idea is to develop a spatial culture where people are empowered to go and find work regardless of location, rather than having to wait for work to come to them'. By measuring and standardizing occupational ratios, Innova develops models of non-territorial offices and 'dynamic ecological workplaces' where no one has rights to any particular workplace and no workplace belongs to anyone in particular. Businesses generally find Innova's tailored solutions very attractive because the idea that one can create a direct correspondence between an organization's work dynamics and its use of space – the idea that two or more people can use the same desk and computer without increasing density of population – can lead to huge savings in property rent.

Repetition

Two years before I joined the project, the architectural firm hired to develop the interior design for the new headquarters had carried out a preliminary survey and estimated a total population for the company of 2000 employees. Innova's most important task when I arrived in September 2007 was to count the actual number of people who would be moving to the building in October 2008, and to benchmark this number against the original 2000 count used by the architects to design the building's layout. The project had also among its tasks surveying the technological and archival infrastructure that would be attached to the moving population.

Around the time I joined the project, Petrolco designated a Project Coordinator, whom I shall call George, to supervise our relationship with the various departments in the company. Early in September 2007 Innova presented George with a plan to carry out Number 2000. There were three steps to the plan. First, we had to arrange meetings with every one of the 32 senior directors of the company to introduce them to the project and get them to tell us how many people worked for them. We were hoping it would take just over one month to produce the information: two weeks of meetings and two weeks for directors to obtain the data. Next, we would take the information to the architects and help them design an office layout for every department. Finally, we would be using the information of who-works-where-how to develop a 'change management' training programme to prepare the company's population for the new building's ecology of work. Our plan was to start the training programme early in the New Year, ten months ahead of the move.

Although the plan for the production of Number 2000 was ready by September 2007, we did not start meeting with directors until early November. A few days after we presented the Number 2000 plan to George, he called an urgent meeting of a special task force which would later become the project's Coordination Team. George had looked at a PowerPoint presentation that we had included among the set of documents to be presented to directors, and had panicked. At a private meeting with me, he said he knew nothing of the contents of such presentation and thus felt he was in no position to validate and sanction it. He had convened a meeting with a group of top managers (the Director of Human Resources, Director of Facility Management, Senior Manager of Internal Communications, Senior Manager of IT and the Head of Corporate Security), whom he was hoping would take responsibility for approving the presentation and giving the go-ahead to our meetings with the company's senior directors.

Over the following three weeks the special task force met three times and kept in regular email contact. Every meeting generated a cascade of emails and suggestions. An original suggestion in one meeting by the Director of Human Resources would be endorsed by the rest of the team, only to be tweaked and tampered with in future correspondence, away from the personal visibility of face-to-face interaction. Decisions that seemed robust, attracted consensus and were agreed upon in one meeting would radically change direction days later following an email or a telephone call. Ideas and proposals bifurcated and multiplied in all kinds of unexpected ways, and no one, not even George, seemed to hold the centre under such overwhelming sense of proliferation.

For management consultants proliferations had material consequences. Over their three weeks of meetings, the discussions and resolutions taken by the task force led to Innova developing eight different versions of the PowerPoint presentation. During this time, a team of no less than six of Innova's consultants worked night and day to make hundreds of changes so trivial and minute that some of the members of the task force eventually asked for them to be revised again, not remembering they were the ones who had asked for those changes in the first place. Such was the havoc generated by the presentation that in the end a decision had to be taken by one of the company's highest ranking world directors to use an original presentation prepared by Innova in 2006, back when the project was first pitched to the Board of Directors.

This is an important point and one I would like to underscore: the economy of knowledge management, as I came to experience it, is an economy of repetition. The work of management consultants consists in generating the material conditions for what Marilyn Strathern has called the 'literalisation' of a cultural ideal (Strathern 1992: 5), in this case, the notion that business innovation and knowledge management are better provided for in a cultural and physical environment that is flexible, mobile and transparent. Social change often involves a simple process of making the implicit explicit (Strathern 1992: 44), and this is certainly true of the production of knowledge as a managerial process. However, for management consultants to turn this idea into something patently obvious to the oil company required abundant material work, generally of a repetitive nature. The work of

knowledge managers and consultants consists thus of generating ever new material forms (Excel sheets, PowerPoint presentations, email exchanges, meetings) where the mantra of innovation and flexibility is repeated time and time again (cf. Thrift 2005: 215)

There are different modes of repetition, however, and the one I would like to talk about here resembles what I shall call a whirlpool economy of repetition. The episode with the PowerPoint presentation is a clear instance of such a whirlpool dynamic, where an idea or object swirls around in circles producing many variations of itself before it settles down and sediments. The idiom is one that Tarde would have approved of, for he too thought reality tended to gyrate and spin in sociological fashion – which is why he so often falls for the metaphor of the 'whirlwind' to describe the original vibratory impulse of social life (for example, Tarde 2006: 28, 72, 74, 78). The image recalls too Georgina Born's description of the 'circulatory economy of expertise' of corporate managerialism as a 'parasite assemblage', a form of knowledge that feeds on/off its own proliferation (Born, this volume).

Another example is the conceptual and editorial work that went into producing different illustrations (below, from A to B to C to D) of the one idea, 'the new building will support our work processes', which was used in the PowerPoint presentation.

Over three weeks of periodic meetings, images A, B and C were discarded by the Coordination Team for variously invoking, in the words of some of the attendants, 'a machine-like environment, as if our people were simply cogs in a larger machine', or 'the notion that our new building is a beach resort. We don't want to convey the wrong impression: people come here to work.' At the meetings, nobody ever contested the notion that a more dynamic environment would, indeed, improve work processes. Rather, what dominated the discussions over the appropriate images to use was a sense of social 'integrity', a variously perceived urge to make sure that the final outcome delivered the right apportionment between aesthetic,

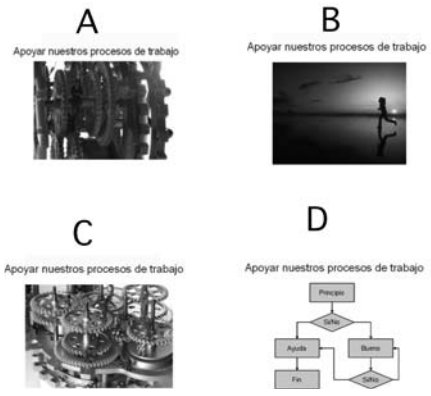

Figure 7.1

cultural and institutional processes, so that the image and the message chosen would create no distress among the workforce. Image D was finally designed by George himself, in a desperate last attempt to prove to Innova's graphic designers that one could indeed illustrate the notion of 'work processes' – although George's design was never subjected to public scrutiny at a meeting of the Coordination Team.

These two examples, of the many versions produced of the PowerPoint presentation and the various images proposed to illustrate the concept of 'work processes', are, in some respects, trivial examples. But my argument here is that it is such trivia, such minutiae, that makes up the economy of knowledge under contemporary 'knowledge economy' conditions. It is the *economy of scale of repetitive trivia* that leads to the production of knowledge as a managerial process. Let me elaborate a little further on this point.

Appropriateness

After the two-month ordeal of preparing the PowerPoint presentation, in November 2007 Innova's consultants were ready to start meeting with the company's senior directors. At the meetings directors were asked to help manufacture three types of information:

(i) A list of all the people working under their directorship, including temporary workers and subcontractors. We also needed them to produce a three-year forecast of their department's growth. To help them compile this information, we emailed them an Excel sheet containing a list of all the people Human Resources had registered for their directory. We asked them to check the list and complete it with the names and rank of anyone missing. We further asked them to complete this information using a colour code: *red* for tenured members of staff who did not appear in the list; *green* for temporary workers and subcontractors who did not appear in the list; *orange* for expected increases in the population of tenured professionals; and *yellow* for expected increases in the population of temporary workers and subcontractors.

(ii) Building on the Excel sheet, we asked directors to assign to every member of their department a category of mobility. At Innova, so-called 'mobility categories' are used to describe how and why people move around: whether one works mostly from one's desk and computer (the category for this kind of mobility is called *Standard*); whether one spends most of the time in meetings, or helping out colleagues based in offices other than one's own (for example, the way IT technicians visit people to do repair work – the category for this kind of mobility is called *Advanced*); whether one spends most of the time outside the building (for example, if you are a sales person, or a manager who travels regularly); or whether one's job requires of special technical and spatial appliances (this category is called *Technic* – most technics in Petrolco are geologists and geophysicists, who work with huge satellite maps of oil fields and thus require unusually long desks to fold these out). Following on from Innova's earlier scenario-building analysis, directors were recommended to consider dividing their workforce into the following statistical

blocks: 25% Executives, 25% Advanced, 40% Standard, and 10% Technics.

(iii) Finally, directors were asked to draw a 'relational map' for their unit, indicating degrees of connectivity with those units or departments they regularly worked with, detailing the types of relationships that different people, with different mobilities, had with colleagues inside and outside their departments. This would give Innova an idea of the types of dynamics prevailing in each department: who meets with whom, where and for how long, and what are their categorical relationships. Further, Innova's consultants created a column in the Excel sheet with the name 'Relational Map', to be used by directors to link a person's entry in the sheet with their position in the map.

The project's team held 32 meetings over the following three weeks. Every meeting went through the same routine: we showed the PowerPoint presentation, explaining the project's philosophy and the competitive advantages that would accrue to the new ecology of work; we went through the Excel sheet, explaining that some tenured, and certainly all temporary and subcontracted workers, would be missing from the list; we explained the mobility categories; we sketched a relational map of their department, and then took a photograph of it; and on every occasion we obtained a commitment from a director that the information we required from them would be ready in two weeks' time.

It took not two weeks but two months to obtain the information. A minority of directors diligently returned the revised Excel sheet by email. But in most cases we had to make new appointments, visit the directors in their offices, and sit side by side with them working our way through the name, position, rank and mobility category of each individual listed under their department in the Excel sheet. On one occasion we even had to walk around a director's department in his company, jotting down the names of all the people working there. In this process, the number of people went through an excruciating politics of (dis)aggregation. For example, we found directors regularly adding people to their Excel sheets without introducing the details of every new employee added; deleting proper names and adding generic names, such as 'engineer', 'lawyer', 'geologist' or 'temporary staff'; changing people's rank and status; sometimes, even, adding comment fields to the Excel sheet, as when a comment was inserted noting that an expatriate worker ought to be counted and assigned a desk of his own in the new building, despite currently living and working in Spain. Moreover, most directors failed to produce forecasts of population growth for their departments, and when they did they often confused the colour code, mistaking temporary workers for permanent staff, or forecasts of the former for current staff of the latter. And almost no director remembered to create a link between people's entries in the Excel sheet and their position in the relational map.

Notwithstanding, after much work and not a little patience, a final count was produced by the end of January 2008. Throughout this period, every time a director sent us a new version of the Excel sheet we forwarded a copy to a Senior Manager in the Human Resources department (hereafter, Paul), who had been allocated the task of making sure that the data produced by directors was in line with company policy and predictions. By the end of January, Paul's version of the Excel sheet

threw a difference of 200 people when compared to Innova's, because he had given up trying to make sense of the colour codes used by directors and decided to count current and future staff as one.

Below are a number of copies of Excel sheets we received back from directors:

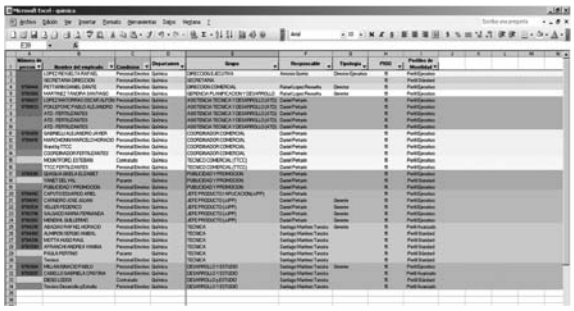

Figure 7.2

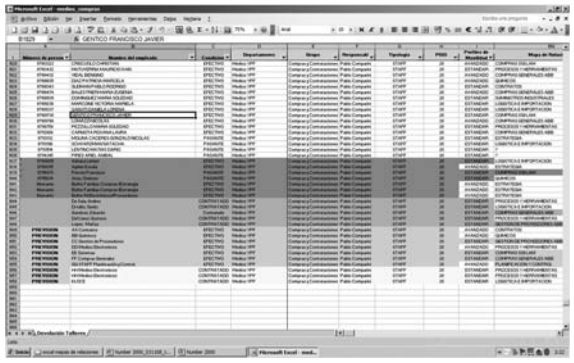

Figure 7.3

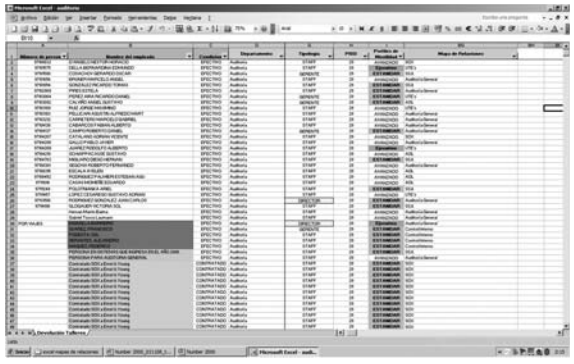

Figure 7.4

Having produced a record of all the people in the company was only half the story, however. The next thing Innova had to do was to visualize such numbers, that is, to make the numbers 'look good', fit for their public presentation. This was no mean feat. A final count of more than 2000 people, for example, would have been disastrous for the project, since the architects had been working for over two years with an estimated population of 2000 people in mind. Inversely, a count of fewer than 2000 people would have also created difficulties, because the oil company was planning to rent five of the building's 34 floors. Thus, a population of less than 2000 people would mean that there was vacant space over and above the estimated, meaning the oil company would have to forego rental earnings at a rate of $3000 per square metre. The project's team task, then, was to find a right visual and rhetorical device that would help make the numbers look appropriate.

One such strategy involved a particular choice of rhetorical device to be used when speaking of a department's population. The original layout for the building had estimated an average occupation of 100 persons per floor, which gave the project's team and the architects some room to speak of every floor as one or as 100 people. For example, when a department's size had exceeded even the most optimistic of forecasts, consultants would often speak in terms of a departmental allocation: they would say 'Human Resources will populate the 16th floor', thus disguising the fact that the population for that department had increased almost 16% in the past two years, from 80 to 100 persons, generating additional pressure on the building's overall stacking. Or they would divert a direct question about a department's growth by speaking of a spatial surplus elsewhere in the building.

'Making the numbers look appropriate' was important for a number of reasons. It turned out that some directors had, with good reason, exaggerated their forecasts when first asked about expected increases in the size of their teams back in the year 2006. Two years later, however, their expectations were not made good, and their departments had experienced very little or no growth at all. George and the Director of Facility Management were anxious about this scenario, because they had made budgetary allocations for the project in accordance with the 2006 population survey. For instance, if a director who had been allocated two floors ended up needing only half a floor, this would create a problem because it would suddenly create open spaces at random points in the building, which would affect both the building's overall layout and that floor's specific layout (with implications for office furniture purchase orders for that floor, IT infrastructure, etc.). Innova's strategy then was to produce and circulate pie charts of 'mobility categories' per department shown as a percentage of the company's total population. This created enough of a distraction for consultants to wait until another director, with exactly the opposite needs, sent in his or her Excel sheet, whose numbers would then help compensate the distortion created by the first director's numbers. Why generate distress among the managerial classes, consultants reasoned, if the whole counting process remained open-ended and inconclusive?

Counting to infinity

Describing the bureaucratic work that went into the drafting of the United Nation's *Global Platform for Action* document, the written outcome of the 'Fourth World Conference on Women', Annelise Riles reports on the delegates' impatience with the procedural constraints of UN conference meetings (Riles 2006). Meetings were experience by delegates with a sense of gridlock; they often felt as if locked up in endlessly detailed discussions, where the passage of time was held in suspension. The elaborate process through which documents were crafted, whereby every delegation had a right to raise queries about every word in the text, always led to a sense of impasse. Riles says that delegates were caught up in the (temporal, but also literal) 'brackets' of the document's narrative, because at meetings words or passages queried by different delegations were marked off the text by placing brackets around them, thus calling for the opening-up of an institutional space (and additional time within a meeting) to attend to such divergences:

> What caused gridlock for the delegates was the collapse of time and institutional progress … such that *no measurement of one against the other was possible*. There was no way of measuring the passage of time until the institutional problem was solved, and likewise no means of measuring progress against the passage of time. Hence any problem required a seemingly *infinite amount of time*, and any moment of time could generate a seemingly intractable bureaucratic problem.
>
> (Riles 2006: 82–3, emphasis added)

Bureaucrats feared intractability, and they feared infinity too. For this reason, the UN's procedural mechanisms for conflict resolution in the making of administrative process rendered bureaucratic knowledge essentially its own form: the focus on bracketing meant that the process was made 'internal' to itself; there was no mechanism for measuring bureaucratic knowledge except its own progress (Riles 2006: 85–7). Not surprisingly, delegates own admission of how progress was made always pointed to sources of agency and creativity *outside* the internal form and structure of the process: 'it was widely acknowledged that nothing ever got accomplished at UN conferences in the formal sessions that adhered to proper form; that progress only occurred in the "informals"' (Riles 2006: 87).

As Riles points out, whilst out of synch with procedural form, in the last instance 'informality' (meetings of smaller groups of people, unconstrained by institutional norm) rendered the bureaucratic process *consistent* with itself, because in providing for its ultimate completion it allowed for its internal cohesion. Thus, informality unhinged the organisation as a procedural compact and prompted a disproportionate effect of sorts: an opportunity to seeing from the *inside* the bureaucratic process's own internal mechanism (Riles 2006: 87–89).

Riles' ethnography of documentary and bureaucratic practices at UN conferences echoes the description of the production of Number 2000 as an instrument of social-cum-technocratic knowledge. As we have seen, at Petrolco the work of

Innova's consultants consisted in creating the standards that would allow speaking of social relationships *in terms of* flexibility, transparency and mobility: Flexibility, transparency and mobility were turned into modes of description *internal* to social relationships.[5] Thus, consultants developed a discursive field where terms such as 'organization' and 'building' worked as proportional objects for one another, helping to keep in place the equation between the productivity of 'management' and 'the social', such that the *measurement of one against the other was possible*.

Keeping such measurements in place required making other measurements invisible. This was most prominent, as we have seen, in the work of making numbers look appropriate. Consultants played with numbers, making them now work as absolute figures, now as percentages of relative change, now as occupational ratios, now as square metres. The organization and the building were squeezed or expanded at leisure, so long as the fiction of their equation was held in view. The process of counting became an excruciating exercise too, with numbers assembling and disassembling as directors aggregated their figures, corrected them, withdrew some numbers only to come back with further additions. There was a sense in which the numbers folded unto themselves, stretching their own numerals with the passing of time. Time dwelt in each number, and it reached a point where every new number agreed upon, every time a definite entry was made into the Excel sheet, 'we move an inch closer to finishing this damn infinite counting business', as a consultant put it.

Conclusion

'What imaginative work do measurements do?', asks Marilyn Strathern in an essay on the imagination of scale in compensation payments and gift-exchange in Melanesia (Strathern 1999: 221). In the Papua New Guinea Highlands, exchanges of pigs and shells index the exchange of human capacities, which index in turn the exchange of body expenditure, such as body exertion and body loss over reproduction, land cultivation, pig rearing or caring for relatives, for instance. As Strathern puts it, 'what keeps one equation in place can only be other equations' (Strathern 1999: 209). In this chapter I have described one such exchange of equations: the making of knowledge management into an analogy of the social. This required of consultants to deploy an array of management techniques of 'measurement by ratio' (Strathern 1999: 218), such as converting people's time–space relations into mobility ratios or using such mobility ratios to draw and map occupational ratios. To such effect, consultants set out to measure and count people, desks, archives, square metres and their interconnections (as in the 'relational maps'). Equations were set up that would hold in place and make significant other equations.

Gabriel Tarde, we have seen, was keen on such equations too. Indeed, part of my argument in this chapter has been to show that, in this sense, Tarde participates of the proportional imagination that is constitutive of modern social theory. Such imagination provides the measurements – the height, length and width – for our sociological descriptions. It allows for thinking of social life as an analogical stream of equations, an ongoing conversion of social measures into other social

measures. But if there is a lesson to be taken away from the Number 2000 project that is that not all forms of conversion do the same work: A proportional imagination dictates not how to *proportion* the world.

Take Melanesians (in this case, Hageners') exchanges of ratios. Strathern indicates how the conversion of ratios across cultural and social domains has led Hageners to engage resource extractors (mining and timber logging companies) through a mode of proportional exchange. For Hageners, gift-giving and taking are cultural techniques for measuring human capacities:

> The Hagen negotiator puts his wealth into his exchange partner, and the 'produce' comes back in the form in which it was inserted. People thus measure what is taken out by what was put in; their own power to extract wealth is measure by the power of those who had extracted it from them in the first place.
>
> (Strathern 1999: 222)

Profit extracted from the ground by mining companies must therefore index the hidden resources that the ongoing exertion of human and ancestral capacities by Highlanders has lodged there. For Hageners, compensation claims are simply expressive of a conversion of ratios. Not for developers, though, who have responded to resource compensation claims by Highlanders with disconcert and an outright sense of *disproportion*. Like Riles' bureaucrats, in their experience of social management developers fear encountering the intractability of the infinite.

In this respect, it is clear where and when the Number 2000 project confronted its own disproportionality: appropriateness and repetition were cultural and institutional forms demanded by those involved in the project to gauge and measure their own sense of accomplishment. George's nervousness about the PowerPoint presentation centred on his requirement that it became a vehicle for reproducible knowledge; that it gathered enough consensus for it to be repeated and travel along the organization. One may say that what George was hoping to accomplish through the consolidation of repetition was the establishment of an exchange ratio whereby his own self-image was enabled as a proportion (a measurement by ratio) for the idea of organiszational change as a whole. He mobilized PowerPoint as a politico-organizational technology of de-monstration (Stark & Paravel 2008), for re-surfacing and re-assembling the corporate. Hence the significance of what on the surface of it looked like organizational trivia and minutiae – not for George, who knew that the (anthropological imagination of the) figure of proportionality enabled the conflation of the infinitesimal into the infinite. The process of making numbers look appropriate involved a similar zooming in and out of the organization and the building as comparable objects *at any and every level of analysis*, from the molecular to the infinite.[6] The production of analytical data and the imagination of a social ontology became thus correlative exercises.

The disproportionate and the infinite finally bring me back to the question with which I opened the chapter, about the ontological turn in contemporary sociology: how social theory 'nets out' its descriptive projects in ontological fashion. Where does social theory confront its own disproportionality?

The recent Phoenix rising of a neo-Tardian social imagination owes much to Bruno Latour's concern for finding a forefather to actor-network theory (Latour 2002, and his chapter in this volume). For Latour, Tarde's attempt at building up an associative monadology is emblematic of an ontological project to be lauded for rendering the world flat. Tarde's imaginative flights between the big and the small are strategically deployed to render negligible any notion of sociological size. Latour writes:

> With this principle we should not consider that the macro encompasses the micro, but that the micro is made of a proliferation of incommensurable entities … which are simply lending one of their aspects … to make up a provisional whole. The small holds the big. Or rather the big could at any moment drown again in the small from which it emerged and to which it will return.
> (Latour 2005: 243)

Without size what the methodological world of social theory ought to look like, then, is like a 'flatland' (Latour 2005: 172). Social theorists need to flatten every empirical concept and object they come across in order to trace their proliferating connections and associations. Only once flattened we will get some sense of purchase over the real distances that connections have to travel every time they render the social visible and intelligible – albeit not political, because the political requires, for Latour, a second strategic move, whereby the flatland is rendered once again dimensional and volumetric. The political involves the moment of re-description through which the flatland is reassembled again into a collective. Such project in proportional re-description (from the empirically sizable to the methodologically flat and back to the politically dimensioned) has as its ultimate aim 'the progressive composition of one common world' (Latour 2005: 256).

The ontology of the common world, as much as the ontology of the sociological whole or the ontology of social relations, is an effect of our proportional imagination. Flattening and re-dimensioning the world is an obvious exercise in re-proportioning. Indeed, the very attempt at rendering the social accountable to ontology, I have tried to show, falls prey to the same aesthetics of proportionality. Unless the sociological project is finite (which I take it not to be), then ontology is no size for it. This is not to say that such analyses are flawed; only that they do not take stock of the full extent of their own analytical movements. And just what may be those analytical movements in Tarde's case?

Tarde's descriptive language is charged with metaphysical excess, as he himself acknowledges in the last sentence of *Monadology*. His prose is infused with size, scale and exorbitant magnitude.[7] Perhaps then it will pay us to stay with him, by his sense of excess. In *Fragments of a Future History* (2002), the science fiction novel he authored, Tarde takes the action underground, into an underworld where humanity has sought refuge from a dying sun. This is hardly a flatland, an open territory of ramifying connections, but, in the words of H.G. Wells, who wrote the book's postface, a world apposite for a 'stalactite philosophy' (Wells 2002: 118). In this fictional pre-(post)-ANT world, the greatest exemplar of the arts is architecture,

which has finally liberated itself from the burden of façade-building and can now dedicate itself to explore the beauty of the interior: architecture renders the search for the human soul an enterprise in pure excavation (Tarde 2002: 72). Inside the world, Tarde seems to be telling us, humanity will eventually come unto itself. In a wonderful passage, Tarde recounts the philosophy of the underworld's 'most famous sociologist', for whom the history of mankind will realize itself when 'the last man finds himself alone, the only and final survivor, heir to a hundred successive civilizations', inhabiting the very centre of the earth (Tarde 2002: 99). 'Happiness', Tarde tells us in another of his wonderful end-of-story sentences, 'lives hidden' (Tarde 2002: 108). Tarde's philosophy emerges thus a philosophy of extremes, of abyssal depths and subterranean metaphysics, that makes life flow deeper and deeper, against the odds of a frozen exterior.

Where does social theory confront its own sense of disproportionality? With Tarde, one is tempted to say *inside* itself: in the stalactitical residues of every ethnographic re-description.[8]

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Notes

1 A note on convention: hereon I distinguish between proportionality and commensurability. Proportionality posits a relation of magnitude between two objects or orders of knowledge; commensurability, on the other hand, standardizes such relation to a common measure. Although it is not uncommon to use the two interchangeably, in my usage proportionality refers to a sociological imagination whereas commensurability is a description of a normative discursive effect. Thus, in a passage cited below, Tarde uses a proportional imagination to posit a relation between the ontic reality of being human and the microscopic reality of atomic and subatomic action. Tarde brings to life the relation between big and small, the eternal and the ephemeral, through a proportional imagination but, as he observes poignantly in the same passage, such relation entails no commensurability at all. On a similar distinction, between measurement as scale and measurement as matching, see Strathern (1999: 205–6).

2 The use of an ontological proportionality for sociological purposes is not, however, Tarde's or Durkheim's achievement. One can trace back the imagery of political and sociological proportionality all the way back to sixteenth century mechanical philosophy, if not before. A wonderful example is to be found in the use Hobbes makes of the proportion in his political ontology: 'The world … is Corporeall, that is to say, Body; and hath the *dimensions of Magnitude, namely, Length, Bredth, and Depth*: also every part of Body, is likewise Body, and hath the like dimensions' (Hobbes 1651 [1909]: 524, emphasis added).

3 Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Tarde's texts are my own.

4 Tarde speaks variously of 'excrements', 'fugues' and 'losses' (Tarde 2006: 29, 81, 84).

5 A Tardian move by all accounts: 'The advance of every science consists in suppressing external likenesses and repetitions … and replacing them by internal likenesses and repetitions, – that is, comparisons of that material with itself' (Tarde 2000 [1899]: 31).

6 '[The social laws (of repetition, opposition and adaptation) have] a tendency to move along a path of steady growth, from a comparatively infinitesimal to a comparatively infinite scale' (Tarde 2000 [1899]: 94).

7 Summing up his social laws (repetition, opposition and adaptation), Tarde sentences, 'all three of these factors work together to effect the expansion of universal variation in

its *highest, widest, and profoundest* individual and personal forms' (Tarde 2000 [1899]: 98, emphasis added).

8 In case you wondered, the count of the final Number 2000 project threw up 1772.