Gabriel Tarde’s essay “Monadology and Sociology” (1895), a revised edition of “Les monades et les sciences sociales” [Monads and the Social Sciences] (1893), decisively contributed to the introduction of the Leibnizian term monad into the conceptual landscape of the then-emerging social sciences. Ever since, references to the monad have been pervasive throughout (at least francophone) sociology and anthropology—usually with no direct reference nor explanation of the Leibnizian concept itself.

In this context, the term monad mainly applies to humans or persons considered in themselves as centers of agency, i.e., as the spontaneous sources of their actions without external relations or macro-structural determinants. It does not necessarily mean that such determinants do not apply but rather that the monadic point of view is that of a “closed individuality” or what Norbert Elias called homo clausus. The basic property of the monad in this context is windowlessness—even though the original problem that prompted Leibniz to state that windowlessness, namely the rejection of the doctrine of the real inherence of accidents, is absolutely ignored and largely irrelevant. There are several examples of this wide reappropriation of the term. Sociologist Pierre Clastres stated that an individual exists both “as pure relation and as monad” (1966, 29), thus suggesting that the monad corresponds to an individual deprived of any kind of relations with something else outside herself. Pierre Bourdieu insisted on a monadic point of view, meaning that individuals perceive distinctly only a part of the world while perceiving the rest confusedly (Bourdieu 2001; Zitouni 2014). More recently, Luc Boltanski (2008, 40) noticed that it is meaningless to talk about “domination or exploitation for persons understood as monads”—alluding thus to a kind of extra-monadic relations, which certainly did not exist for Leibniz and which can be confused with the relation of monadic domination. In other cases, the term monad also applies to societies considered as fully coherent and closed wholes—a term and a view that anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss rejected in his Structural Anthropology.1

One could immediately object that these uses of monad refer to doctrines that have only a vague resemblance to Leibniz’s genuine concept
(when they do not plainly contradict some aspects of it). In this respect, it is easy to show that the self-proclaimed neo-monadologies amount to non-monadologies from a Leibnizian point of view. This latter remark applies, for instance, to Bruno Latour’s rephrasing of actor-network theory in terms of monadic networks, as if the metaphysics of monads had anticipated the sociology of networks (Latour 1999). We shall not enter here into the details of those lexical borrowings for, as legitimate as they are in their own context, they hardly constitute a reception of Leibniz’s philosophy as such.

However, in the past two decades, anthropologists have more substantially referred to Leibniz, not for his monad, but for his perspectivism, according to which each being (not necessarily human) is a center of agency and subjectivity. This conception—which may appear at first sight a renewed form of animism—has been used to clarify the kind of relations that some Amazonian Indians have with their direct environment, and especially the status of some species of animals and plants in what can be called their ontological framework. The debate about so-called “Amazonian ontologies” that was originally triggered by basic ethnographic issues has evolved in the so-called “ontological turn” of contemporary social sciences. According to the latter, implicit ontology (i.e. the way beings are described in one’s environment) is an anthropological feature: all human groups do not furnish the world in the same way nor presuppose the same distinction between nature and culture, human and non-human, mind and matter and persons and objects as conveyed by most Western ontologies. The relativity of such “ontological conceptions” has been perfectly illustrated by an anecdote reported by Claude Levi-Strauss in Race and History: 

In the Greater Antilles, a few years after the discovery of America, while the Spaniards were sending out Commissions of investigation to discover whether or not the natives had a soul, the latter spent their time drowning white prisoners in order to ascertain, by long observation, whether or not their bodies would decompose. 

(1952, 12)

The Spaniards’ ontological conception implies that Natives have bodies as real as their own, but questions whether they have souls; the Natives’ ontological intuition presupposes that the Spaniards do have souls comparable to their own but perhaps not bodies subject to putrefaction like their own. The anecdote was first read as supporting cultural relativism, but more recently as supporting a form of perspectivism, for the Natives do attribute agency and subjectivity to beings that might not be acknowledged as humans. The question now arises whether the explicit references to Leibniz’s perspectivism are somehow substantially more relevant than the former references to Leibniz’s monad. We shall answer through
an examination of the Leibnizian references found in Viveiros de Castro’s and Descola’s anthropological writings. We shall see that they both share the thesis of individuation through bodies, but that they refer to it through two different readings of Leibniz at the end of the nineteenth century in France: Gabriel Tarde’s and Émile Durkheim’s. We shall thus see how the reception of a single Leibnizian proposition (and not of a whole philosophy) gave rise, from the beginning, to different Leibnizian turns in social sciences.

1. Perspectivism and Body: Viveiros de Castro

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro—an anthropologist who specialized in a North-Eastern Amazonian Indian group known as the Arawaté—is at the origin of the contemporary theory of perspectivism in anthropology. In his fieldwork, which focused on the construction of the environment, he realized that Arawaté social relations were not restricted to human beings, but that (some) animals, plants, and spirits were also perceived as persons with whom they interact, especially through dreams and ritual ceremonies. In these interactions, humans take the place, point of view, or (better yet) the perspective of nonhumans, so that the usual Western distinction between humans and nonhumans, or between natural and cultural beings, is blurred. To account for this, Viveiros de Castro started by rejecting the thesis that Indians simply have another representation of our common world. In contrast, he defended the existence, for those Indians, of a multiplicity of perspectives that determines a multiplicity of worlds and introduced therefore the expressions of cosmological perspectivism or perspectivist cosmologies. Additionally, in his reference article on “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,” he characterized perspectivism as:

an indigenous theory according to which the way humans perceive animals and other subjectivities that inhabit the world—gods, spirits, the dead, inhabitants of other cosmic levels, meteorological phenomena, plants, occasionally even objects and artefacts—differs profoundly from the way in which these beings see humans and see themselves. (1998, 470)

The expression “indigenous theory” can be deceptive. A perspective is not a mental representation, nor a belief shared by some peoples, but a comprehensive mode of being based on the relation of subjects determined by their bodily points of view in the world. If a representation characterizes a relation between a subject and a given object, a perspective characterizes a relation between (embodied) subjects. In a perspectivist frame, there is nothing like an objective thing, a natural thing, or...
a thing itself that could exist outside any perspective and that could be represented in different ways by different subjects; rather, every being, thing and person does not exist outside relational perspectives. These perspectives differ from each other not because the subjects perceiving with such perspectives differ but because the perspectives are embodied and thus related to different kinds of things: “Animals see in the same way as we do different things because their bodies are different from ours” (1998, 478). The human body and the nonhuman body differ not necessarily from a physiological viewpoint, but from the point of view of their affects, their memories, their dispositions and their habitus: a “bundle of affects and capacities” is at the origin of perspectives (ibid.). Viveiros de Castro uses an example—that what man sees as blood is seen as beer by the jaguar—that has been quite influential in subsequent literature:

all beings perceive (“represent”) the world in the same way. What varies is the world that they see. . . . Being people in their own sphere, nonhumans see things just as people do. But the things that they see are different. Again, what to us is blood is maize beer to the jaguar; what to us is soaking manioc is, to the souls of the dead, a rotting corpse; what is a muddy waterhole to us is for the tapirs a great ceremonial house.

(2004, 472)

In this account, Viveiros de Castro departs both from totemist and animist explanations by challenging their main assumptions: that one should acknowledge invariable structures in the first case and a substantial conception of interiority in the second case. In the reconstruction of a totemist Weltanschaung, a series of natural differences (for instance, between two natural species) is said to signify a series of cultural differences (for instance, two social roles), thus assuming that the natural/cultural series and the natural/cultural divide are somehow universal structural invariants. In the common interpretation of “animism,” a soul can be attributed to various non-human beings, typically plants and animals (which, as the word indicates, are ensouled with an anima or have a form of “interiority”). Against this naturalistic view of animism, Viveiros de Castro interprets the attribution of a soul to an animal (and considering it as a person) not as the projection of social representations but as the attribution of a role of subject; in other words, the animal perceives itself as a person, or as a human, and perceives other beings as either persons or non-persons. A “person” is a soul expressing a point of view that can be that of a human, an animal or a spirit: “In sum, animals are people, or see themselves as persons” (1998, 470). This point is developed by referring to Leibniz—actually, to Deleuze’s Leibniz—in a single footnote (*) at the end of the following passage:
Thus self-references such as “people” mean “person,” not “member of the human species”; and they are personal pronouns registering the point of view of the subject talking, not proper names. To say, then, that animals and spirits are people, is to say that they are persons, and to personify them is to attribute to non-humans the capacities of conscious intentionality and agency which define the position of the subject. Such capacities are objectified as the soul or spirit with which these non-humans are endowed. Whatever possesses a soul is a subject, and whatever has a soul is capable of having a point of view. Amerindian souls, be they human or animal, are thus indexical categories, cosmological deictics whose analysis calls not so much for an animist psychology or substantialist ontology as for a theory of the sign or a perspectival pragmatics.

So, every being to whom a point of view is attributed would be a subject; or better, wherever there is a point of view there is a subject position. Whilst our constructionist epistemology can be summed up in the Saussurean formula: the point of view creates the object—the subject being the original, fixed condition whence the point of view emanates—Amerindian perspectival ontology proceeds along the lines that the point of view creates the subject; whatever is activated or “agented” by the point of view will be a subject [*].

[*] Such is the foundation of perspectivism. It does not express a dependency on a predefined subject; on the contrary, whatever accedes to the point of view will be subject.


In this perspectivist ontology, it is not that each and every animal accedes to a point of view, but that each point of view, characterized by its specific differentiation through the related body, is constitutive of a position of subject. The body creates the point of view, and the point of view creates the subject. Again, the perspective is not a purely mental phenomenon but is determined by the particular complexion of the related body: “A perspective is not a representation because representations are a property of the mind or spirit, whereas the point of view is located in the body” (1998, 478). And Viveiros de Castro adds a new reference to Deleuze’s book on Leibniz in a footnote to the previous quote: “The point of view is located in the body, says Leibniz” (quoted in Viveiros de Castro 1998, 485). Le point de vue est dans le corps. The expression is not found in Leibniz, but a footnote by Deleuze indicates it is a paraphrase of a letter to Lady Masham from 30 June 1704:

The question whether [the soul] is somewhere or nowhere is purely verbal; for its nature does not consist in extension, though it agrees with extension which it represents. So one should place the soul in
the body in which it is located its point of view according to which it 
the soul represents the present state of the universe (ainsi on doit 
placer l’âme dans le corps, où est son point de vue suivant lequel elle 
se représente l’univers présentement).

(G III 357; LNS 214)

Leibniz also used similar formulations. In the first draft of the New System, he stated that “the body gives [the soul] its point of view in the world” (as translated in LNS 26) or, put better, that the body makes the soul’s point of view in the world. In the New System, he wrote of “the organized mass in which the point of view of the soul lies” (G IV 484; LNS 17). In his notes on Bayle, he claimed “that each soul is a living mirror representing the universe from its point of view, and above all with respect to its body” (G IV 532; LNS 76).

The body makes the soul’s point of view in the world, for the soul perceives the infinite multiplicity of phenomena only through the mediation of an organic body: it mirrors the whole universe by representing the modifications of its associated body, endowed with a certain organic complexity whose modifications result in turn from all material phenomena. The body assigned to a monad thus accounts for the distinction or the confusion of its perceptions, for the organs serve to concentrate some bodily affections so that they appear more heightened or more distinct than others: “the organs gather together a number of light rays or air waves in order to make them have a greater effect through their union” (Monadology 25; LM 78). According to Leibniz’s harmony, a soul is not directly affected by modifications to its body, but perceives modifications to a body that is particularly assigned to it: “Thus, every created monad represents the whole universe; nevertheless, it represents more distinctly the body which is particularly attached to it and of which it is the entelechy” (Monadology 62; MPE 158). Because of the particular assignment of a body to a soul, that body can be said to constitute the point of view of the soul. In this regard, the soul is always an organic soul, for it cannot exist independently of a body or of the organs of a body. In other words, the soul has organs, namely the organs of the body. This conception is perfectly expressed in Monadology 72, where the possessive form of “its organs” can be read as referring both to the soul or to the body: “Thus the soul only changes body bit by bit and by degrees, so that it is never stripped of all its organs all at once” (LM 136). Only by perceiving both the phenomenon of its body and its relations to other bodies can the soul perceive or determine an ideal order within those phenomena and thus occupy a point of view while understanding the place of ideal points in space, though it does not itself occupy a physical point in space.

Parallels between the Amazonian and the Leibnizian perspectivism are necessarily limited, for many points of the Leibnizian doctrine are left out: such as that bodies (and souls) must have an infinite organic structure, and that this structure accounts for the difference between confused
and distinct perceptions. Yet the parallels with Leibniz help to highlight what is at stake in the perspectivist conception: the body-soul union or the rejection of a sharp divide between bodies and souls. In both ontologies, there are no souls separated from a body. One could say that in both ontologies a soul is embodied because a body is ensouled. There is actually one exception for Leibniz: “God alone is entirely detached from body” (Monadology 72; LM 28). This exception determines the true place of the ontological turn in anthropology: the Neo-Leibnizian ontologies that get rid of God.

2. Diverging Multiplicities: On Amazonian and Neo-Leibnizian Ontologies

Viveiros de Castro’s article raised the issue of ontology in contemporary anthropology. Both his (Leibnizian) statement that one should acknowledge many place-holders for subjectivity in order to account for the Arawaté mode of being and his (this time non-Leibnizian) assumption of an inverse symmetry of points of views (the fact that the Arawaté assume that animals perceive themselves as persons) have attracted a lot of attention from anthropologists, which triggered an interest in the anthropology of non-human beings (see Sulkin (2005) and Pauknerová et al. (2014)). The vocabulary of agency, perspective, ontology, self and interiority has been pervasive throughout anthropological case studies in the past two decades. We will not examine them here. Rather, we will spell out the first formulation of the Neo-Leibnizian turn.

The description of perspectival ontology, i.e., of a furniture of the world that corresponds to the Amazonian perspectival cosmology, is more lengthily addressed in Viveiros de Castro’s ensuing monograph, Cannibal metaphysics (2014). This description is directly based on Deleuze’s work and indirectly on Leibniz’s doctrine. Such references cannot escape the common objection addressed to anthropologists that they import and project the conceptualities of their own culture into the cultures studied. We shall initially leave aside these criticisms by pointing out that it is inappropriate to talk of ontology and metaphysics—as typical Western patterns—in the case of Amazonian Indians, and that the convergence between Leibniz and the Amazonians is made from the Leibnizian point of view. Rather, we focus first on the way this reference and this convergence are used in the description.

Viveiros de Castro made this point in a chapter entitled, with a non-Durkheimian but truly Deleuzian flavor, “An Anti-Sociology of Multiplicities.” Indeed, the chapter begins with key statements from Deleuze’s Difference and Repetition, in which Deleuze intended to get rid of the classical notions of essences, unified entities and types and replace them with an ontology of becomings (devenirs), events and the pure difference of a multiplicity: “Multiplicity is thus a meta-concept that defines a new type of entity”; “it aims at dethroning the classical metaphysical notions
of essence and type [and] is the mode of existence of pure intensive difference” (quoted in Viveiros de Castro 2014, 108–9). Deleuze did not aim at an ontology of relations between fixed terms, but at intensive, dynamical relations in a network. Each event does not only modify the “thing” or the “being” undergoing it, but the whole network of multiplicities in which it is embedded in such a manner that “things” or “beings” are primarily characterized through this network rather than through pre-existing and enduring types and essences. In other words, each so-called “thing” involves a multiplicity in itself. Thus the classical convertibility between entity and unity does not apply here, which is precisely what Viveiros de Castro used to describe Amazonian ontology. Next in the chapter is a Deleuzian reference to Leibniz:

In short, and the point goes back to Leibniz, there are no points of view on things—it is things and beings that are the points of view (Deleuze 1994, 56 [Ref. 1]; 1990, 173–4 [Ref. 2]). If there is no entity without identity, then there is no multiplicity without perspective. A rhizome is not truly one being, either. Nor can it be several. (2014, 110).

The passage discloses the ambiguity of the Leibnizian reference. On one side, it is adequate for sketching the constitution of a multiplicity of points of view. Indeed, Leibniz expressed these two aspects of perception through two complementary well-known metaphors: that of a city represented by a multiplicity of perceivers so that the city does actually exist only for the perceivers; and that of the “living mirror” that produces its image of the world (see Monadology 56 and 57; LM 25). On the other side, Leibniz cannot be understood as the forerunner of this ontology of pure difference in which multiplicity means that neither one being nor one being can be determined. Actually, Viveiros de Castro’s overthrow of the Leibnizian axiom according to which “what is not one being is not one being either” (Leibniz to Arnauld, 30 April/1687; A II 2, 186; LA 201) is even more explicit in the French original version of the text, in which the rhizome—which can be regarded as the fundamental ontological element—is explicitly said to be neither one being nor one being: “S’il n’est pas un être, un rhizome n’est pas non plus un être” (2009, 80). The meaning and the limits of this Leibnizian reference are precisely mirrored in the two Deleuzian passages to which Viveiros de Castro refers, one from Difference and Repetition [Ref. 1] and one from The Logic of Sense [Ref. 2]. In both passages, Deleuze makes his departure from Leibniz explicit by refusing the overall convergence in God of multiple diverging series:

[Ref. 1] Each point of view must itself be the thing, or the thing must belong to the point of view

(Deleuze 1994, 56, translation modified).
The Point of View is in the Body

From Leibniz, we had already learned that there are no points of view on things, but that things, beings, are themselves points of view. Leibniz, however, subjected the points of view to exclusive rules such that each opened itself onto the others only insofar as they converged: the points of view on the same town. With Nietzsche, on the contrary, the point of view is opened onto a divergence which it affirms: another town corresponds to each point of view, each point of view is another town, the towns are linked only by their distance and resonate only through the divergence of their series, their houses and their streets. There is always another town within the town. Each term becomes the means of going all the way to the end of another, by following the entire distance. Nietzsche’s perspective—his perspectivism—is a much more profound art than Leibniz’s point of view; for divergence is no longer a principle of exclusion, and disjunction no longer a means of separation.

(Deleuze 1990, 173–4)

The ontology of multiplicity is thus conceived as resulting from a conceptual subtraction: it makes sense of Leibniz’s doctrine of the infinite multiplicity of things as points of view, but without keeping the convergence of all things in God, which eliminates multiplicity and pure difference itself (see Viveiros de Castro 2014, 110). The ontology of pure difference, or of multiplicity, could thus be summarized as a monadology without harmony. In other words, Leibniz without God.

Viveiros de Castro reinterpreted, after Deleuze, the monadological account as a way to think “how variations can be described or compared without presupposing [a steady] invariable ground” (2014, 114), that is, without assuming universal invariants (as Claude Levi-Strauss did) or a pre-established order (as Leibniz did). This kind of “conceptual subtraction” is probably necessary to make sense of non-Christian indigenous systems—and, above all, of anomic societies that acknowledge no God, king or laws—and is explicitly formulated by the neo-monadological accounts of Tarde, Whitehead and Latour (2011). It is then in no way astonishing that Viveiros de Castro does not follow the Deleuzian path to Nietzsche but the path to Gabriel Tarde as the most adequate metaphysics to describe the ethnographic problem raised by the Arawabé or Yupi tribes. Gabriel Tarde—whose main axiom is that “each thing is a society” (Tarde 1895, 338) for “diversity and not unity lies at the heart of things” (Tarde 1895, 362)—is thus quoted by Viveiros de Castro:

The truth is that differences go differing, and changes go changing, and that, as they take themselves thus as their own finality, change and difference bear out their necessary and absolute character.

(2014, 114)
Viveiros de Castro’s interweaving of references, which leads to Leibniz through Deleuze and Tarde, revives the Neo-Leibnizian turn in Tarde’s metaphysical sociology. The interpretative operation may seem complex and strange: On the one hand, it is a question of transforming the monadology into an ontology of diverging multiplicities; on the other hand, it is a question of using this complex doctrine to shed light on certain salient features of the Amerindian ways of life. This would be strange if this operation were illegitimately generalized and claimed, for example, that individuals in Amerindian groups were like diverging multiplicities deprived of any supra-convergence. But this remains relevant if it is to illuminate the view that men regard plants and animals as subjects of agency in a world where no fixed essence of things is presumed, nor any stability or permanence of bodies around us. This, of course, does not entirely accord with the Leibnizian doctrine: if, according to the famous metaphor, each monad is a perspective on the same city, so that the city itself “is, as it were, multiplied in perspectives” (Monadology 57; LM 25); it must not be forgotten that there was only one created city—the universe—after God himself multiplied the possible perspectives on the universe in his understanding (see Discourse on Metaphysics 14; A VI 4, 1549–50; L 311–12). Certainly, the *Discourse on Metaphysics* makes it possible to justify the thesis according to which a subject does not make the point of view, but rather that the point of view makes the subject. But for Leibniz, the point of view—even if it does not exist independently of that for which there is a point of view—has already been considered by another subject—God.

Finally, the question of God inevitably raises the question of convergence: is it possible to think of perspectivism—that “the point of view is in the body” or that individuation is obtained through the body—without assuming a general convergence in the manner of Leibniz or a general divergence in the manner of Tarde? We shall now turn to Philippe Descola, who defended a middle position and added a new intertextual layer to this debate by opposing two readings of Leibniz, that of Tarde and that of Durkheim.

3. Remarks On Individuation Through Bodies: Descola’s Alternative Reading

The anthropologist Philippe Descola encountered similar ethnographic issues while working on the Achuars—another Amazonian people living at the frontier of Peru and Ecuador—especially with the Achuars’ relation to the so-called “natural” environment, which should properly be thought of as pertaining to the category of culture (see Descola 1986). The Achuars, noticed Descola, communicate as often with animals and plants as with members of the same group or family: humans and non-humans are seen as sharing some qualities or properties, so that
relations between humans and non-humans are perceived as relations between persons. Again, the problem addressed is to gain better intelligibility of such human behaviors and institutions by making explicit the principles or the underlying ontology that may account for them. In his monograph Beyond Nature and Culture (2013), Descola distinguished four kinds of ontology, or modes of existence, or modes of articulating nature and culture: naturalism (which corresponds to the Western “great divide” between nature and culture); analogism (which assumes similarities and correspondences between the different elements of the world); totemism, as previously defined; and animism understood as “the attribution by humans to nonhumans of an interiority identical to their own” (2013, 129). As for Viveiros de Castro, we shall leave aside the discussion about the heuristic and anthropological relevance of such big boxes and whether these categories overlap. We shall only focus on Descola’s specific use of Leibnizian references, which in his case do not spell out Amazonian ontologies, but rather address criticisms of the idea of a convergence between Leibnizian and Amazonian ontologies, or perhaps only to some Amazonian ontologies, for the complex theory of the “reversed symmetry of points of views” is not shared by many animist peoples and cannot be seen as direct “ethno-epistemological corollary of animism” (2013, 143).

First, Descola did not put Leibniz together with the Amazonians in the same ontological big box. Amazonians belong to the animist big box; Leibniz belongs also to a modified form of the naturalist one and also to the analogist one. In an analogist ontology, the world is composed of an infinite multiplicity of singularities that can be made intelligible through systems of correspondence. Leibniz, like Descola, departed from a pure naturalistic ontology and belonged to “a more discreet trend of thought [that] remained attached to finalist convictions and the idea of a nature organized in accordance with an overall plan” (2013, 68). Descola read Leibniz as primarily believing in the continuity of the great chain of beings, and found support in the treatise On the Ultimate Origination of Things:

To be sure, the God of Leibniz, even more than that of the medieval philosophers, fills the world with as many things as possible: “Among the infinite combinations of possibilities and possible series, the one that exists is the one through which the most essence or possibility is brought into existence.”

(Descola 2013, 204; the translation of Leibniz’s quote from G VII 303 has been modified after AG 150)

Second, Descola did not interpret animism as Viveiros de Castro did—and hence did not need to go back to Tarde—although he himself quoted Tarde’s axiom that “To exist is to differ” at the beginning of Part Three
on the dispositions of beings (Descola 2013, 127; Tarde 1895, 196). He refused the symmetrical aspect of Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism: that plants and animals are seen as persons does not imply that they perceive themselves as persons. Humans humanize animals, but it is not necessary to imagine that animals animalize humans. Moreover, it is not necessary to assume that human and nonhuman beings share a similar interiority and differ but by their bodies. If Viveiros de Castro referred to Tarde for his principle of differentiation through bodies, Descola objected that this very principle is also to be found in Émile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. If this is the case, then not only is Durkheim as “inspired by Leibniz” (Descola 2013, 140) as Tarde but by the principle of an individuation through bodies:

> It is not through their souls that humans and nonhumans differ but through their bodies. Durkheim had earlier made the same point when he remarked with his usual perspicacity that “two sorts of elements produced the idea of a person. One is essentially impersonal: it is the spiritual principle that serves as the soul of the collectivity. The principle is the very substance of which individual souls are made. . . . From a different point of view, if there are to be separate personalities, some factor must intervene to fragment and differentiate this principle; in other words, a principle of individuation is necessary. The body plays this role.” [quote from Durkheim 1995, 273] (Descola 2013, 129).

However, I cannot resist the temptation of first noting a little paradox: this interpretation of perspectivism that Viveiros de Castro presents as an alternative to the sociocentric thesis of a “projection” (of social categories on to the natural world) concurs with a penetrating remark made by Durkheim, the most illustrious advocate of the latter thesis. In his study of the role played by the body as a principle of individuation, to which I have already alluded, Durkheim remarks that such a contrastive function devolved upon it since “bodies are distinct from one another, since they occupy different positions in time and space, each is a special milieu in which the collective representations are gradually refracted and colored differently.” [quote from Durkheim 1995, 273] Like Viveiros de Castro, Durkheim was inspired by Leibniz: “For Leibniz, the content of all the monads is identical. All in fact are consciousnesses that express one and the same object: the world. . . . However, each expresses it from its own point of view and in its own manner. We know how this difference of perspectives arises from the fact that the monads are differently placed with respect to one another.
Durkheim’s last quote is surely ill-formulated from a Leibnizian perspective: monads cannot be said to be “differently placed with respect to one another” since spatio-temporal relations do not apply to monads, but result from them, as the letter to Lady Masham already quoted shows, among many other passages (see Fichant 2016). The expression becomes fair if it is applied to bodies that are (a) “distinct from one another, since they occupy different positions in time and space” (as Durkheim and Leibniz put it) and (b) inseparably associated or attached to monads (as Leibniz put it).

What Descola pointed out by his “little paradox” is that individuation of the body—and the acknowledgement of a point of view of the body as the convergence of a network of relations—can be justified both by Viveiros’ or Tarde’s non-representational theses of perspectivism and by Durkheim’s representational thesis of sociocentrism (which is basically a projection of representations). Indeed, the context of Durkheim’s quotation and the reference to Leibniz are significant: the question is to show how the sociological analysis of the notion of person obtains results similar (analogues) to those of the Leibnizian analysis. The two analyses converge in the role attributed to the body. Indeed, said Durkheim, the idea of person or personality has often been thought of through the category of soul, and this has often been thought of as separable from the body (whether in popular beliefs or in the philosophical doctrine of separate forms). But, continued Durkheim, Leibniz thought of the individuation of monads through the individuation of bodies, and this is why “of all philosophers, Leibniz is one of those who had the most vivid sense of what the personality is” (1995, 273). Let’s examine the meaning and the limits of this reference to Leibniz.

Durkheim argued that the notion of person results from two factors: first, an impersonal spiritual principle, which is like the soul of the collectivity, as a collective patrimony in which all consciousnesses commune; and second, that bodies individualize this collective principle according to their points of view. To individualize means here to differentiate, to fragment and consequently to personalize. It is as if the same universal consciousness were differently reflected, coloring each body to give birth to a particular consciousness. This is what Durkheim wrote when commenting on Leibniz in the passage deleted in Descola’s quote:

All in fact are consciousnesses that express one and the same object: the world. And since the world itself is but a system of representations, each individual consciousness is in the end only a reflection of the universal consciousness.

(1995, 273)
Durkheim supports the general proposition of individuation through bodies, which has, as with Leibniz, two immediate corollaries: that the soul (which can be labelled according to the author’s monad, person, or consciousness) is inseparable from the body; and that the soul perceives the whole universe by perceiving its own body, which is to say that all souls always perceive the same object according to their points of view. This is Leibniz’s doctrine: “It is not in the object, but in the modification of the knowledge of the object, that monads are limited” (Monadology 60; LM 26). Durkheim thus wrote in a similar way of “consciousnesses involved in bodies” (consciences engagées dans les corps) (1995, 273). In the analogy proposed by Durkheim, the “universal consciousness” plays the role of the “world” in Leibniz: the two would be only a “system of representations” that would be perceived according to particular perspectives. This “universal consciousness” introduces the converging element of all perspectives, which was precisely rejected by Tarde. However, if the function is comparable, Durkheim did not take up the monadological thesis according to which bodies themselves result from an infinity of monads, that is to say, from an infinity of perspectives on the world. By focusing on the notion of person or consciousness, Durkheim stuck to the realm of human social relations and did not generalize perspectives to all non-humans.

In the end, “universal consciousness” may appear as a kind of collective soul of the world—which Leibniz has always rejected (see, for example, Leibniz to Hartsoeker, 6 February 1711; G III, 520)—unless seen as the equivalent of a divine point of view that is understood as a principle of convergence of all particularities (rather than all Tardian multiplicities). To put it shortly: Durkheim conceived of Leibniz without God, but with another form of convergence. The very same Leibnizian proposition thus receives different versions in contemporary anthropology, all of which can be found in the very origin of French social sciences.

4. Conclusion: Leibnizian Turns Between Tarde and Durkheim

In this essay, we sketched the reception not of Leibniz’s philosophy as a whole but of a single proposition that attracted much attention—but in different ways—from both Tarde and Durkheim and from Descola and Viveiros de Castro after them: the thesis of individuation through bodies. Leibniz’s reception in anthropology has been mainly mediated through Deleuze’s work, which itself resulted from a series of mediations as far as Leibniz was concerned. Indeed, one of Durkheim’s students, sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, was in charge of the French part of the international edition of Leibniz works, which was unsuccessful due to the First World War. He wrote an introduction to Leibniz in the spirit of Durkheim’s interpretation (Halbwachs 1907). Halbwachs became an influential figure and, through many conversations, prompted his colleague in Strasbourg, the
great historian of philosophy Martial Gueroult, to work on Leibniz. Gueroult’s ensuing book (Gueroult 1934), dedicated to Halbwachs, was to become Deleuze’s main reference up to his last book on Leibniz (Deleuze 1988). However, these various mediations are less linear and more labyrinthine than they seem, as the intertwined references we have analyzed show. Deleuze, and later Viveiros de Castro, indeed followed Tarde’s reading and not Durkheim’s. The thesis of individuation through bodies thus gave rise to two turns among French sociologists: Tarde’s claimed neo-monadology (positing multiplicities without convergence) and Durkheim’s otherwise claimed monadological sociology (positing convergent particularities). It is well known how much these two authors clashed in the discussion about the definition of the emerging social sciences at the end of the nineteenth century, and how much they did not want to reduce them to philosophical speculation (Durkheim 1904, 83) or to a pure ontology (Tarde 1904, 84, 87). The reason for this is given in one name, Émile Boutroux, one of the common interlocutors of both Tarde and Durkheim. He is now known only for having published the first critical edition of *Monadology* (Boutroux 1881), which corrected Erdmann’s defective first edition of the French original text (OP 705–12). But at that time, he was best known for his work—always based on Leibniz—concerning the determinism of the laws of nature, his project of a mathematics of human actions and his defense of religion as alone being able to give a harmony superior to that of the nature. Although he himself did not contribute to the debate on Leibnizian perspectivism, he did, however, have a decisive role in the emergence of a new figure: that of a social Leibniz.

Notes

1. See Levi-Strauss (1963, 333): “According to my critics, the order of orders as I conceive it consists either in a total reconstruction of the concrete society I would first attempt to break down into structures (which would make the breaking-down endeavor useless) or in the assertion that, for a given society, all structures are homologous—which would really be saying that each society constitutes a kind of monad, at the same time perfectly coherent and hermetically sealed. Neither of these interpretations could be more remote from my position.”

2. See (G IV 477; LNS 26): “All of this is quite independent of outside things which might make them arise in the soul, and nevertheless conformable to the rest of the universe, but particularly to the organs of the body which gives it its point of view in the world.” (My emphasis).

3. Schrecker’s translation is here more accurate than the other English ones: that the monad “représente plus distinctement le corps qui lui est affecté particulièrement” (G VI 617) does mean that the monad represents the body that is particularly assigned to it, not that the body is particularly affected by the monad (as in PW 14; L 649; LM 128).

4. The English translation gives “Deleuze 1994, 49” for [Ref. 1], although it does not suit the immediate context. The original French version (Deleuze 1968, 79) gives a reference that corresponds to “Deleuze 1994, 56.”
5. The term “thing” must be substituted for “object” for the sake of literality: “Il faut que chaque point de vue soit lui-même la chose, ou que la chose appartienne au point de vue” (Deleuze 1968, 79).

6. We will not follow here the Deleuzian reference to Nietzsche, as opposed to Leibniz, although the expression “anti-sociology (contre-sociologie)” was initially applied to Nietzsche in a book by Klossowski quoted by Deleuze (Deleuze 1972, 442).

7. See Deleuze (1994, 47): “The world, as that which is expressed in common by all monads, pre-exists its expressions. It is nevertheless true that it does not exist apart from that which expresses it, apart from the monads themselves.”

8. See Descola (2013, 129): “This attribution humanizes plants and, above all, animals, since the soul with which it endows them allows them not only to behave in conformity with the social norms and ethical precepts of humans but also to establish communicative relations both with humans and among themselves. This similarity of interiorities justifies extending a state of ‘culture’ to nonhumans.”

9. Michel Serres (2015), while granting the relevance of these categorical distinctions, showed that the modern European world cannot be reduced to the naturalistic ontology (articulated as the distinction of bodies and souls), but that its development has involved totemic, animist and analogical elements.

10. Consistent with his reading of Descola’s four-kind ontology, Serres interpreted Leibniz as pertaining altogether to the animist and analogical positions as opposed to Cartesian naturalism (Serres 2015, 56, 67, 92, 124).

11. We will see that Descola does not only follow “the precedent of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and, before him, Émile Durkheim” in seeing “Leibniz’s metaphysics as providing a point of access to this sort of animist ontology” (Smith 2015, 89), for different interpretations of the individuation through bodies are at stake.

References


