

BOOK REVIEW

Audrey Borowski, *Leibniz in His World: The Making of a Savant*

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024. Pp. 320. ISBN 978-0-691-26074-7. £30.00 (hardcover).

Tzuchien Tho 

University of Bristol

When I first got serious about a PhD project on Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz some decades ago, I quickly realized that I would not be able to understand my materials unless I had a good grasp on how Leibniz's writings mapped onto the chronology of his voyages, places and people of interest, restless correspondences, numerous projects and sequence of employers. Not only did one have to be clear on the theoretical priorities in this timeline, but this chronology had to be multi-linear, following Leibniz's separated but often entangled projects in the realms of the political, economic, theological, philosophical, mathematical and so on. The tools to understand these lineages are a necessity to this field of research.

Leibniz in His World offers us a resplendent fulfilment of this necessity. However, one should not expect to gain a deep grasp of Leibniz as a thinker. This is not the goal. In this it differs from Maria Rosa Antognazza's more substantial classic intellectual biography (2011). One might say that Leibniz (like a monad) serves as a node, a point of view, in a sprawling network of interlocked personal, political, social and theoretical relationships. The biography is primarily about this network, but it is told from Leibniz's life insofar as he is the best-known character in this group. Borowski's biography is therefore a complement to Antognazza's – where the latter engages in context to depict the thinker, the former paints the group through the individual. This complementarity is engaging, and offers a more complete picture of Leibniz in, and through, his time.

Borowski is an exemplary acolyte of the 'contextualist' methodologies holding sway in the history of ideas of recent decades, which emphasize social and epistolary context as the precondition for understanding. But the cutting edge swings both ways. The attentive portrait of this network is insightful, providing a richer understanding of this period of precarious intellectual entrepreneurs, their rivalries and friendships and their patrons before the establishment of modern academic institutions. This provides a more complete understanding of Leibniz. As Leibniz himself famously complained to his friend Vincent Placcius, 'Qui ni non nisi editis novit, non novit' ('those who only know me through my published writings, do not know me') (A II, 3, N.48, 139). Borowski depicts an aspect of Leibniz of which we are dimly aware but too often ignore in favour of well-polished publications.

Yet the splendour of instances does not lead Borowski to offer any substantial connection between context and ideas. How did these episodes of social competition or patronal courtships influence the content of metaphysics, mathematics or ethics? How did Leibniz alter his theological ecumenicalism through relationships with churchmen, princes and ministers? Was his mathematical study only a means to establish credibility with more celebrated philosophers? Whereas the social narrative unfolds with richness, these conceptual connections are conspicuously lacking in the book.

Nonetheless, these missed connections are more than sufficiently compensated for by the central and non-trivial focus on Leibniz as a projector, a mode of social and courtly manoeuvring that is little discussed in scholarship. Here, Leibniz is something like a start-up entrepreneur, venturing on the application, for the goal of political and financial profit, of mechanical, mathematical-financial, chemical and social ideas. In the absence of a capital-investor class, these projects were pitched to the noble and aristocratic classes, and were maintained through one's reputation with scientific societies and royal courts. Borowski's book is welcome for reintroducing Leibniz under the slogan *theoria cum praxi* (theory with practice) as a projector. Again, although one is aware of these aspects of Leibniz's involvement with machine manufacture (calculators, microscopes and so on), and the Hanoverian Harz mines, this biography provides a stark and fully developed account of Leibniz as projector. Another title could have easily been 'Leibniz the Projector', as Borowski frames the overall narrative of the book on this theme.

The theme of projectors is introduced early, and launches (in Chapter 1) into Leibniz's career just after his double doctoral studies as a preparatory period for this eventual persona. Chapters 2 to 8 then lead us into his Paris period, where he made the connections necessary for this vocation. In Paris, Leibniz was exposed to a world of ideas previously closed to him. In his 1676–7 return to the German lands, covered in Chapters 9 to 13, now in the employment of the House of Hanover, Leibniz finally began to engage in projection with international scope. With epistolary activity, Leibniz's projection activities moved between France, Austria, the German lands and the Netherlands, despite almost never leaving Hanover. This part of the book is the most consequential and interesting, addressing Leibniz's relationship with his employer, Duke Johann Friedrich; his lifelong friend and confidant, Johann Daniel Crafth; and Johann Joachim Becher, a friendly quasi-nemesis fellow projector. A cast of other characters also addressed is well known from the scholarship, including Christophe Brosseau, Adolf Hansen and Hermann Conring. With each, Borowski adds new layers of nuance.

This biography thus spans from 1660s, when Leibniz was in his early twenties, to his late twenties in Paris (1672–6), then the start of his Hanoverian period (until the early 1680s). The story ends before Leibniz turned forty (Leibniz died at seventy). In many ways, we could understand this as the 'young' Leibniz. However these chronological distinctions may be more suitable for a philosophical biography. Borowski's biography show that, by his mid-thirties, Leibniz was already a mature member of the projector class, and had already settled into patterns of wheeling and dealing those speculative 'projects' which tended to have brought more modest returns than initially touted.

I found my close reading of Borowski's biography to be rewarding. However, this is due to some substantial background knowledge and a grasp of the basic chronology of Leibniz's life and works. It is therefore an excellent supplement to Antognazza's more direct biography. For those more interested in a 'group portrait' of intellectual, courtly and economic life in the seventeenth century, the book may form an important part of a reading list. What is much appreciated here is the drawing into relief of Leibniz as a courtier and projector, an aspect of Leibniz just as real as those admired mathematical treatises and metaphysical architectures.