

## Latour and the Guarantees of Modernity

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What do you think of pre-modernity? What comes to mind? Pause here and list three traits that characterize premodern times. What does pre-modernity have to do with contemporary thought on Technology and Religion?

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, anthropologist of technoscience Bruno Latour takes us back to pre-modernity. But as he returns us to premodern times he reminds us that we never really left: We Have Never Been Modern! We are amodern. Modernity was not so much a failed experiment, as post-modernists would have it, inasmuch as it was a way of managing relations among culture, nature and spirit. Modernity, as Latour sees it, amounts to certain checks and balances (relations) among the cultural (or social), natural and divine: “[Moderns] have not made Nature; they make Society; they make Nature; they have not made society; they have not made either, God has made everything; God has made nothing, they have made everything” (p. 34). These modern checks and balances allow us to practice science and remain deeply spiritual: we can explain natural or social events without ever appealing to divine intervention. We can explain culture, nature or technology without ever appealing to the spiritual. Or we can accept that nature is real while believing that culture is constructed. We can believe in nature but suspend belief of the supernatural. In one breadth, these checks and balances guarantee a distinct separation or *purification* of God, Nature, and Society (or the divine, natural, and social), and in the same breadth, render the *translation* of these into hybrids (mixes of artefacts, humans, nature, societies, and God/s) “invisible, unthinkable, unrepresentable” (p. 34). For Latour, modernity was a simultaneous practice of purification (breaking traditional, premodern bonds between things) and translation (forming modern bonds and recombining things into collectives, mixtures or hybrids). If modernity meant that we purify God, Nature, and Society as we eliminate mixtures of these three, then we were never modern. We naïvely ignored the new hybrids and pretentiously claimed that we succeeded in purifying everything.

Latour identified the three great sources of authority to be divine law, natural law and social law but noted that these sources of authority were rendered mute in modernity and derived voices from theology, natural science and social science. Theologians spoke for God, natural scientists spoke for nature, and social scientists spoke for society but denied the voices of each other. For example, the theologians distrusted science and the scientists distrusted religion as sources of authority. Faith was distrustful of reason and vice versa. Natural scientists distrusted the social scientists. Social scientists were sceptical of biological determinism and natural scientists were sceptical of technological determinism. Both were sceptical of predestination. Theologians were blamed for peddling superstition and scientists were blamed for disenchanting the world. While they were feuding and denying the authority of each other, says Latour, hybrids of artefacts, natural things and spirits were proliferating behind their backs. Now, the new hybrids of culture, nature and the divine cannot be ignored.

By pinning down the checks and balances that allowed us to act modern, Latour invites us to once again be amodern or think in premodern terms of hybrids and mixtures of the cultural, natural and divine. By unraveling the guarantees of modernity, we are empowered to recognize that culture, nature and the divine or supernatural are not pure. We are empowered to entertain mixes or hybrids. Culture is not merely "in here," nature is not merely "out there" and God is not merely "up there." Our world was never any more disenchanted than we were modern. Nietzsche's pronouncement that "God is dead" and the tales of disenchantment that followed were self-fulfilling prophesies. Our cosmos are enchanted. Our technologies are enchanted.

If we ascribe spirits to objects, digital or otherwise, are we crossing the line into animism or totemism? Or more specifically, are we technoanimists? If we objectify the divine or recognize spirituality in nature or artefacts, are we crossing the line into idolatry? Perhaps, but this may our path back to the future.