

## **We Have Never Been Modern (1991)**

**Author:** [Bruno Latour](#)

Bruno Latour, a distinguished French philosopher, anthropologist, and sociologist, is renowned for his profound contributions to the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS). Born on June 22, 1947, in Beaune, France, Latour has spent much of his career exploring the intricate relationships between society, technology, and science. His interdisciplinary approach has led to groundbreaking work that challenges traditional boundaries within the humanities and social sciences. Latour's seminal texts, including "Science in Action" and "We Have Never Been Modern," critically interrogate the nature of scientific inquiry and the construction of modernity, offering innovative perspectives that have influenced a diverse range of academic disciplines. His intellectual legacy continues to inspire scholars and researchers worldwide, prompting ongoing debates about the ways in which science and society are co-constructed.

### **Description of the Text**

#### **The Proliferation and Denial of Hybrids**

Bruno Latour highlights a strange contradiction in modern thinking: we constantly debate complex topics that mix multiple fields, yet we often treat them as simple, single issues. He calls these mixed topics "hybrids."

For example, global warming is not just about science, politics, or economics—it involves all of these areas. However, people often discuss it as if it belongs to just one category, ignoring its broader connections. A hybrid, according to Latour, is not a single thing but a combination of many different influences.

The real issue, Latour argues, is that modern society refuses to acknowledge hybrids. This denial comes from the foundations of Modernism, which values "pure" knowledge by dividing it into separate disciplines. Ironically, in trying to purify knowledge, modern science actually creates more hybrids—new technologies, new scientific discoveries, and new social issues that all overlap.

The paradox is that while modern thinkers work to keep knowledge pure and separate, they are constantly producing hybrids. Yet, they must deny their existence, or else the idea of "pure" knowledge falls apart. Latour explains that modern thinking focuses only on purification, ignoring another crucial process: translation or mediation—the ways different ideas and fields influence one another.

## Intermediaries vs. Mediators

Bruno Latour explains that knowledge does not simply move from one place to another unchanged. Instead, it is always shaped and transformed along the way. To understand this, he makes an important distinction between *intermediaries* and *mediators*.

Intermediaries simply transfer information without changing it—like a delivery service that brings a package to your door exactly as it was sent. Traditional science assumes that knowledge works this way: facts are discovered in a lab, published in journals, and shared in newspapers, all without altering their meaning.

Mediators, on the other hand, actively change the information as they pass it along. A scientific fact is not the same in a lab, in a research paper, or in a news article—it is shaped by each step in the process. For example, a study on climate change in a science journal will look very different from how the same study is presented in a newspaper or a TV news report.

Latour argues that there is no such thing as *pure* knowledge that remains unchanged. Instead of focusing only on facts, we need to study the *networks*—how knowledge moves, who transforms it, and how different fields and media reshape it.

## The Illusion of "Modern" Knowledge

Modern science assumes that knowledge can be kept pure and separate from society. But Latour argues that this has never been true. The belief in pure, unbiased knowledge comes from the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, when thinkers like Robert Boyle promoted controlled experiments and "matters of fact." To make this work, they had to ignore how knowledge is always shaped by its surroundings.

This is why Latour says, *We Have Never Been Modern*. If being modern means creating completely objective, separate knowledge, then no society has ever truly achieved this. Instead, modern thinkers live under an illusion that such knowledge exists, while in reality, everything is connected and transformed through mediation.

## The Great Divides

Bruno Latour explains that modern thinking is built on two big separations, which he calls the *Great Divides*:

1. Nature vs. Society – This idea assumes that the world is split into two separate realms:
  - *Nature*: The objective, independent world of things, facts, and science.
  - *Society*: The world of human culture, beliefs, and social interactions.
2. Humans vs. Non-Humans – This separation assumes that humans (who study and interpret the world) are completely different from the objects and non-human entities they study.

Latour argues that these separations are not real—they are just ideas created by modern thought. In reality, nature and society are always mixed together, and humans constantly interact with non-human things (like technology, animals, and the environment).

### The Problem with Traditional Views

Latour criticizes three common ways of thinking:

1. Scientific Positivism – This belief assumes that facts exist independently of humans and that science simply *discovers* them. Latour argues that humans play a role in shaping knowledge, so no fact is completely pure or separate from society.
2. Social Constructivism – This belief claims that all knowledge is created by humans and that nothing exists outside of human influence. While Latour agrees that facts are constructed, he warns that this view ignores the reality that nature still exists and affects us.
3. Discursive Theory – This idea suggests that everything is just language and that nature and society are nothing more than words and discussions. Latour disagrees, insisting that real things (both natural and social) exist beyond just talk.

### Rethinking Knowledge

Latour believes that instead of trying to separate everything into neat categories, we should recognize that things are always Natural, Social, and Discursive all at once. Instead of breaking knowledge into purified parts, we should focus on how things are connected and how knowledge is created through relationships.

Modern thinkers try to *untie* knowledge into separate categories, but Latour wants to *retie* everything together—showing how science, society, and communication are always mixed.



## **Scientific Realism vs. Social Constructivism: Two Sides of the Same Coin**

Latour criticizes the way modern thinking forces us to choose between two extreme views of knowledge:

1. Scientific Realism – This view assumes that reality exists independently of humans. Science (with a capital “S”) simply discovers fixed, objective truths about the world.
2. Social Constructivism – This view argues that reality is entirely shaped by human culture, society, and politics. According to this perspective, facts are not discovered but created by people.

Even though these views seem opposite, Latour says they are actually based on the same flawed idea: the belief that there is a strict separation between nature (the world of objects) and society (the world of humans). Scientific realism gives all the power to nature, while social constructivism gives all the power to humans.

### **Latour’s Alternative: Networks, Not Divisions**

Latour suggests that instead of thinking in terms of subjects vs. objects or nature vs. society, we should focus on networks and connections. Reality is neither purely discovered nor purely constructed—it is shaped through relationships between both humans and non-humans (such as technology, nature, and objects).

Modern thinking ignores this complexity because it assumes knowledge is transferred through intermediaries (which pass information without changing it). But in reality, knowledge always moves through mediators, who actively transform it along the way.

So instead of comparing different "cultures," Latour says we should compare networks—because what really shapes our world is how we organize and connect things in these networks.

## **A New Way of Thinking: Networks, Symmetrical Anthropology, and Relative Relativism**

At the end of *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour proposes a fresh approach to understanding the world. Instead of using old categories like Society, Nature, Politics, or Culture, he suggests focusing on networks—complex connections between humans and nonhumans.

### **1. Networks Instead of Divisions**

Latour argues that we shouldn’t reduce everything to a single explanation. Instead, we should see reality as a collective of different actors—people, institutions, technologies, and even nonhuman elements—working together. No single category (like “economics” or “science”) can fully explain how the world functions.

### **2. Symmetrical Anthropology**

Traditionally, anthropology has studied non-Western societies, examining how they mix humans and nonhumans in ways different from the West. But Latour points out that the West also does this, even though it pretends not to. He calls for an anthropology of the Moderns—one that studies how Western societies organize their own networks instead of assuming they have the only "true" knowledge.

### 3. Relative Relativism (Not Absolute Relativism)

Many believe that because different cultures construct knowledge differently, there is no way to compare them—this is absolute relativism. Latour rejects this idea because it still assumes a strict separation between Society (human beliefs) and Nature (the real world). Instead, he proposes relative relativism, which allows us to compare different networks by seeing how humans and nonhumans interact within them.

There are no separate cultures—only different networks that sort and organize the world in their own ways. By studying these networks, we can understand how some dominate others and how they change over time.

## Conclusion

Bruno Latour argues that the way we divide the world into nature vs. society and science vs. culture is an illusion. These things are not separate—they are deeply connected.

He challenges the idea that modern society is fundamentally different from premodern societies. Instead, he shows that we have always lived in a world of hybrids—where science, politics, and culture mix together.

Latour's solution? Stop thinking in rigid categories and start seeing the world as networks of human and nonhuman actors. This approach helps us better understand global problems like climate change, technology, and social justice.

His book is a call to rethink how we view reality. By embracing connections instead of divisions, we can create better solutions for the complex challenges of today's world.

## **We Have Never Been Modern**

### **Bruno Latour**

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour challenges the way we usually think about the world. We often separate nature from culture, and science from society, believing that modern life is neatly divided into these categories. Latour argues that this is **an illusion**—the world is far more interconnected than we realize.

He explains that the difference between “modern” and “premodern” is something we invented to make sense of our complicated world. In reality, humans, nonhumans, facts, and values are all intertwined. Instead of treating science as something separate from society, he urges us to see the networks that connect everything together.

By breaking down these old ideas, Latour helps us understand that the way we see reality—and the role of science in it—is shaped by the stories we tell ourselves. Once we recognize this, we can start to think in a more open and flexible way about the world around us.

## **Chapter 1 | Re-examining Modernity - The Premise of Non-modernity**

In "We Have Never Been Modern," Bruno Latour challenges the conventional understanding of modernity, arguing that it is, in fact, an illusion. Modernity, as commonly perceived, is grounded in a dichotomy that strictly separates nature from society, summarizing a dualistic thinking deeply embedded in Western thought. **This divide purports that humans and their social constructs are entirely distinct from the natural world, a view that dominates modern scientific, political, and cultural frameworks.** Latour critiques this dualistic mindset, arguing that it oversimplifies the complex reality of our world. He suggests that this flawed binary division fails to capture the intertwined nature of human and non-human elements and their interactions. By examining contemporary issues through this lens, Latour reveals the limitations of modern thought. For instance, environmental crises cannot be adequately addressed if we continue to view nature as separate from human activity. Similarly, technological advancements and their societal impacts challenge easy categorization into 'natural' or 'social' domains.

Through his re-examination of modernity, Latour advocates for a perspective that acknowledges the interwoven nature of entities and processes. By doing so, he sets the stage for a more integrated and nuanced understanding of the world—one that transcends the simplistic binaries that have long dominated modern epistemology. In sum, Latour's core thesis invites readers to reconsider the very foundations of what it means to be modern, urging a shift towards a more interconnected and realistic view of the complex world we inhabit.

## **Chapter 2 | Hybrids and Networks - Understanding the Interconnected World**

In "We Have Never Been Modern," Bruno Latour delves into the nuanced relationship between nature and culture, challenging the conventional understanding of modernity. A focal point of this inquiry is the concept of hybrids and networks, which are instrumental in understanding the

interconnected nature of the modern world. Hybrids are entities that transcend the traditional nature-culture dichotomy, embodying a blend of elements from both realms. Latour posits that these hybrids disrupt the conventional categories that modernity relies upon, revealing the artificiality of these divisions. Modernity promotes a clear distinction between natural and social domains, yet, in reality, hybrids proliferate, creating a landscape where boundaries are blurred and interdependencies are evident.

To elucidate this concept, Latour introduces the **actor-network theory (ANT)**. ANT is an analytical framework that emphasizes the interconnected nature of entities—be they human, technological, or natural—highlighting the complex web of relationships that constitute reality. It underscores that actors, both human and non-human, are embedded within networks that influence and are influenced by one another, thereby creating dynamics that cannot be easily disentangled into nature or society alone.

Illustrative examples of hybrids are abundant in the realms of science, technology, and society. For instance, consider the example of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). GMOs cannot be classified purely as natural since they are the product of human intervention and technological manipulation. Nor can they be seen strictly as cultural artifacts, as their existence and impact are rooted in biological processes. They epitomize the hybrid nature of many contemporary phenomena, entwining the natural with the artificial in ways that defy the modernist paradigm.

In technology, the internet serves as another powerful hybrid. It is a man-made network that transcends traditional boundaries, integrating human interactions, information flows, and economic activities across the globe. The internet's pervasive presence illustrates how technological hybrids complicate the neat separation between the social and the technical.

Even public health issues, such as the spread of infectious diseases, highlight the hybrid nature of contemporary challenges. Diseases do not respect the dichotomy of nature versus society. They spread through networks that include human behaviors, environmental factors, and microbial evolution, showcasing the interdependent nature of what might appear to be disparate domains.

Latour's examination of hybrids and networks thus reveals a world far more interconnected and interdependent than the modern constitution acknowledges. By recognizing and understanding these hybrids, we can develop a more nuanced perspective that transcends the limitations of modernist dualisms. The actor-network theory provides valuable insights into how entities relate and interact within complex networks, offering a more holistic understanding of the underlying forces that shape our world. Through these concepts, Latour sets the stage for a powerful critique of modernity, urging us to move beyond simplistic divisions and embrace the intricate reality of our interconnected existence.

### **Chapter 3 | The Constitution of Modernity - Analyzing Historical Contexts**

The Constitution of Modernity - Analyzing Historical Contexts In "We Have Never Been Modern," Bruno Latour delves into the evolution of what he terms the 'modern constitution' to reveal how historical developments have shaped the contemporary understanding of nature and

culture. Latour's exploration begins with the scientific revolutions that have fundamentally influenced modern thought. These groundbreaking periods in history, such as the Copernican Revolution or the Enlightenment, heralded an era where scientific inquiry and rationality became the cornerstones of knowledge. Latour argues that these revolutions did not just signify leaps in scientific understanding but also entrenched a particular mode of thinking that distinctly separated nature from culture.

The modern constitution, as Latour outlines, is predicated on creating and maintaining a clear demarcation between what belongs to the domain of nature and what is relegated to society, politics, or human affairs. This separation is institutionalized through various disciplines and societal norms that insist on the purity of each realm. For instance, the natural sciences have historically been charged with uncovering objective truths about a passive, inanimate nature, whereas the social sciences and humanities focus on the active, subjective world of human relationships, meanings, and structures.

Latour scrutinizes the role of key societal institutions in perpetuating this binary framework. Educational systems, research institutions, and governmental bodies are often structured in ways that reinforce the division. For example, universities typically segregate sciences and humanities into different departments, which subtly but powerfully endorses the idea that there are fundamentally different methods, objects of study, and truths in each field. Public policies and regulatory frameworks further mirror this division by treating environmental issues (a domain of nature) and social issues (a domain of human culture) as separable problems, each requiring different expertise and interventions.

To comprehend how deeply this bifurcation is ingrained in modern thought, Latour highlights the transformation of societal understanding through pivotal historical episodes. The rise of mechanistic philosophy during the Enlightenment, championed by scientists and philosophers like Newton and Descartes, is a case in point. This worldview posited a clockwork universe governed by immutable physical laws, thus crystallizing a comprehensive model of nature detached from human influence or social constructs. Concurrently, thinkers like Hobbes and Rousseau framed equally deterministic models of society, where human passions, governance structures, and social contracts operated independently of the natural world. Latour does not just narrate a history of ideas; he emphasizes that this historical trajectory has had practical implications for how contemporary societies operate.

#### **Chapter 4 | Deconstructing Purification and Mediation Processes**

In Bruno Latour's "We Have Never Been Modern," part 4 of the summary focuses on deconstructing the processes of purification and mediation. This section dives deep into the mechanisms by which modern societies attempt to maintain a clear distinction between the natural and the social worlds, despite the ever-present and inevitable intermingling of these realms. Modern societies operate under what Latour describes as the "modern constitution,"



which enforces a strict division between nature (the realm of things) and culture (the realm of human action). This constitution leads to an ongoing effort to purify either domain by segregating natural phenomena from social influences and vice versa. However, these attempts are inherently fraught with complications and contradictions because, in the real world, nature and society are deeply intertwined.

The process of purification involves creating and maintaining boundaries that delineate what is considered purely natural from what is purely social. This can be seen in the way scientific disciplines are traditionally organized, with certain fields dedicated strictly to the study of natural phenomena and others to social phenomena. The goal is to achieve clarity and objectivity by treating natural phenomena as independent of human influence and cultural biases.

Conversely, the concept of mediation illustrates how these boundaries are frequently crossed and blurred. Mediation refers to the interactions and translations that occur between the domains of nature and society, resulting in entities that do not fit neatly into either category. These intermediaries, or hybrids, play a crucial role in the functioning of both scientific inquiry and everyday life. For example, technologies like the internet or genetically modified organisms are clear instances of such hybrids. They are born out of scientific endeavors but have profound social implications, challenging the strict separation envisioned by the process of purification.

Latour argues that these mediation processes are not anomalies but rather the norm. In fact, the act of trying to maintain a pure separation often brings about new hybrids. For example, in efforts to purify the natural world from human intervention (such as in conservation efforts), new socio-technical assemblages are created, which themselves become hybrids. These can include everything from wildlife sanctuaries—where human techniques shape natural environments—to climate models that synthesize vast amounts of social and natural data.

Case studies abound that highlight these purification and mediation processes in everyday life. Consider the pharmaceutical industry: medications are produced through rigorous scientific processes aimed at understanding and manipulating natural biological mechanisms. Yet, once these medications enter the market, they are embedded in social contexts that influence how they are perceived, distributed, and used.

## **Chapter 5 | Challenges to Modernity - Globalization and Environmental Crises**

**Part 5: Challenges to Modernity - Globalization and Environmental Crises** As we navigate through the landscape of the late modern era, we are confronted by phenomena that increasingly challenge the established frameworks of modernity. Among the most pressing of these phenomena are globalization and environmental crises, both of which expose the inadequacies of the modernist dichotomy between nature and culture.

Globalization manifests as a complex web of economic, political, and social interconnections that transcend national boundaries, demonstrating the inadequacy of a worldview that insists on clear separations between the local and the global, or the natural and the social. The interconnectedness forged by globalization reveals that the purportedly distinct realms of nature

and society are deeply entangled. Examples abound: a technological innovation in one part of the world can trigger economic changes across the globe, and consumer behaviors in industrial nations can have significant environmental repercussions in distant ecosystems. These examples illuminate the interconnected and hybrid nature of contemporary phenomena, defying the neat divisions that modernity upholds.

Environmental crises, with climate change at the forefront, further destabilize the conventional modernist framework. The climate crisis underscores that human activities and natural processes are inextricably linked. The modernist perspective, which endeavors to maintain a separate and autonomous natural world, fails to grasp the nuanced dynamics at play. Rising global temperatures, melting polar ice, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity are not merely natural occurrences but are profoundly influenced by human actions. These crises necessitate an understanding of how societal practices, economic systems, and technological policies have direct and consequential impacts on the environment.

Latour suggests that the environmental challenges we face are, in part, a consequence of the stubborn adherence to modernist distinctions. The traditional modernist view, which seeks to purify the natural from the social, impedes a holistic comprehension of ecological issues that are inherently hybrid. Addressing such crises therefore requires a paradigm shift that recognizes the entanglement of human and nonhuman actors within intricate networks.

Moreover, Latour argues that the global interconnectedness fostered by globalization is fundamentally incompatible with the rigid separations posited by modernity. Modernist thought, with its emphasis on distinct categories and borders, is ill-equipped to address issues that are inherently transnational and multisystemic. Globalization demands a framework that appreciates the fluidity and permeability of boundaries—one that acknowledges the interwoven and co-produced reality of nature and society. In essence, both globalization and environmental crises lay bare the critical limitations of the modern constitution.

## **Chapter 6 | Redefining Our Understanding - Embracing a Non-modern Perspective**

In Bruno Latour's "We Have Never Been Modern," part six delves into the need for rethinking our approach to modernity and pivoting towards a non-modern perspective. Latour argues that the deep-seated dualisms inherent in modernity—such as the separation of nature from culture—have led to fragmented and often misguided understandings of the world. To address contemporary challenges more effectively, we must embrace a non-modern viewpoint that integrates science, politics, and society in a more cohesive manner.

Latour's proposals for moving beyond modernity begin with redefining our conception of knowledge and reality. Rather than viewing knowledge through a restrictive modern lens that compartmentalizes different domains of experience, we should recognize the interconnectedness of various actors—both human and non-human—within complex networks. This approach

encourages us to see science not as an isolated endeavor but as a collective activity deeply intertwined with societal and political contexts.

One of the key strategies Latour emphasizes is the integration of science and politics. He proposes that scientific practices should be democratized, involving a broader range of stakeholders in the decision-making process. By doing so, scientific knowledge becomes more reflective of diverse perspectives and more responsive to societal needs. This participatory approach can help bridge the gap between expert knowledge and public interests, fostering a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of scientific issues.

Latour also highlights the importance of recognizing the agency of non-human actors in shaping our world. By adopting a non-modern perspective, we acknowledge that objects, technologies, and natural entities play active roles in our networks of relations. This shift in perspective allows us to better understand the complexities of environmental issues and technological advancements, as it breaks down the artificial barriers that modernity imposes between human and non-human entities.

Moreover, Latour provides examples of non-modern approaches to contemporary problems that illustrate the practicality and efficacy of this perspective. For instance, in addressing climate change, a non-modern approach would involve not just scientific experts but also indigenous communities, policymakers, and environmental organizations working together within a network. This collaborative effort can lead to more holistic and effective solutions that appreciate the interconnectedness of ecological, social, and political dimensions.

Another example is in the realm of technological innovation. Instead of viewing technology purely as a product of human ingenuity, a non-modern perspective recognizes the reciprocal relationship between humans and technology. This understanding encourages more responsible and ethical design practices that consider the broader impacts on society and the environment.

## **Chapter 7 | We Have Never Been Modern Review**

In conclusion, Bruno Latour's "We Have Never Been Modern" presents a compelling argument that challenges the very foundation of modernity. By meticulously dissecting the illusion of the modern constitution, Latour invites readers to reconsider the entrenched dualisms that have long dominated Western thought. The artificial separation between nature and society, science and culture, is revealed as not only flawed but also obstructive to genuine understanding and progress in addressing contemporary global challenges.

The recap of Latour's arguments underscores the significance of recognizing hybrids and networks that defy the neat categorization mandated by modernist thinking. Understanding the interconnectedness of entities and phenomena through the lens of actor-network theory (ANT) provides a more nuanced and realistic picture of the world. This, as Latour demonstrates, is crucial for confronting issues such as globalization and environmental crises that do not adhere to artificial boundaries between nature and culture.

The transformative potential of abandoning the modern constitution is profound. By shifting towards a non-modern perspective, we are encouraged to adopt a more integrative approach that acknowledges the complexity and interconnectedness of the world. This involves breaking down the barriers that have long segregated scientific inquiry from political and social considerations. It calls for a holistic understanding that transcends traditional dualisms, fostering a more inclusive and effective dialogue between diverse fields and perspectives.

Latour's vision for the future of non-modern thought is not merely theoretical but practical. He provides strategies for embedding this integrative perspective in research and practice. Embracing hybrids and networks means rethinking how we engage with contemporary problems, whether they concern environmental sustainability, technological innovation, or social justice. By viewing these issues through a non-modern lens, we can develop more comprehensive and adaptive solutions that reflect the true complexity of the world.

Ultimately, "We Have Never Been Modern" is a call to action. It encourages scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to question the status quo and to explore new ways of thinking that are more attuned to the realities of an interconnected world. The book's insights have far-reaching implications, urging a shift from rigid, binary frameworks to a more dynamic and relational understanding of existence. By embracing this shift, we can better navigate the challenges and possibilities of the 21st century, fostering a future that is more responsive and resilient.