

# ANT 261: Science, Religion, and Society: Is the Truth Out There?

Spring Term, 2003: Monday, Wednesday, Friday 10:30 - 11:20 am, Chambers 1027

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Bruno Latour (born June 1947, Beaune, France) is a French sociologist of science best known for his books *We Have Never Been Modern*, *Laboratory Life*, and *Science in Action*, describing the process of scientific research from the perspective of social construction based on field observations of working scientists.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruno\\_Latour](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruno_Latour)

- Why are we reading this? Classic of theorizing in “science studies”
- This is not a case study (obviously) in that Latour is essentially reviewing what others (and some of his own stuff) have done, and through such a wide review, is constructing a theoretical model of the relationship between science and society
- There are a lot of intellectual debates that he is hitting on, but his main argument centers on the **modernity**:
- Modernity is probably one of the most ill-defined yet most used concept in academia. We toss it around as a starting point, an assumption, and as Benny Hill taught us, never assume.
- Most definitions circle around particular characteristics of modernity, including (but not limited to): rationalization, secularization, individualism, positivism, industrialization, commodification, bureaucratization, etc.; modernity is often used as opposed to something else, such as modern vs. premodern, modern vs. postmodern, *gemeinschaft* (communal society) vs. *gessellschaft* (associational society)

## The Problem

- Contemporary life is full of hybrids (the crossing of borders); why doesn't anyone notice this?(Answer, because we think as modern people, even though we are not really modern) The ultimate hybrid he refers to as nature-culture (this harks back to Levi-Strauss's structuralism, see me if you want more), where the main problem is in distinguishing “nature” from “society”
- Modernity has been critiqued in three basic ways: Latour (pg. 5) summarizes these three ways as *naturalization*, *socialization*, and *deconstruction*. Naturalization is represented by E.O. Wilson, socialization by Pierre Bourdieu, and deconstruction by Jacques Derrida (these are three heavyweight intellectuals, and he picks them b/c they also represent “science”, “social science,” “humanities”). They also represent the heart of science

studies – are the scientists right in that nature is everything and that science is the path to enlightenment? Are the social scientists right in that power (in society) is everything, and that nature and ideas are just excuses for someone to have a bigger house/office/car, etc.? Or are the postmodern types right in that the truth (or lack of a truth) is everything, and that both science and society are just fictions?

- Anthropologists, traditionally looking at “premodern” societies, assume a holistic perspective, and also find a holistic context (Latour calls this the “seamless fabric of nature-culture”) where the different aspects of a society are mixed in together (a condition of immanence), instead of discrete unrelated entities (i.e., the way they build homes, grow rice, construct their government, and their cosmology are all interconnected).
- Latour’s definition of modernity: Keeping separate the two practices of **translation** and **purification**. Translation pieces things together, purification keeps things (such as society and nature) separate

### One Example

- Robert Boyle vs. Thomas Hobbes (or a review of Shapin and Shaffer’s book *Leviathan and the Air Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life*)
- In the old days, academics did everything (read premodern), and so both Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes wrote and thought and did things in areas we would now call the natural sciences and social sciences. Latour points out that it is very indicative of the condition of modernity in that the science types selectively remember Boyle’s science stuff (i.e.,  $PV=nRT$ ) and forget his political writings, while social science types like me remember Hobbes’ political writings and forget his science writings (they were wrong anyway)
- “Questions of epistemology are also questions of the social order” (see the long quote on page 16)
- These boys of the English Enlightenment (or for those who are picky “Age of Reason”, precursor to the Enlightenment) laid the foundations for the separation of science and the social sciences. They are both very similar (shared context of English Civil War, etc.) and had similar goals. For both, knowledge (and proving who is right, i.e., authority) is important, but Boyle used experimental proof as the authority, while Boyle used mathematics/logic.
- So what? “Boyle is not simply creating a scientific discourse while Hobbes is doing the same thing for politics; Boyle is creating a political discourse from which politics is to be excluded, while Hobbes is imagining a scientific politics from which experimental science has to be excluded. In other words, they are inventing our modern world, a world in which the representation of things through the intermediary of the laboratory is forever dissociated from the representation of citizens through the intermediary of the social contract.” (Latour 1993:27).
- And what are the implications? (chart on pg. 32)