

Bruno Latour, 1947–2022

An untimely death, a work for the future

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Modernity is characterised by its extraordinary capacity to give a mystified image of itself, and the most enduring aim of Bruno Latour's work might be summarised by evoking the subtitle of his last great theoretical work: an anthropology of modernity.¹ Those of us who mourn his death will miss him above all because we have lost one of the most precious allies we had in confronting the great civilisational challenge of our times, the challenge that Latour named as *landing Modernity* [*faire atterrir la Modernité*].*

One of the great lessons of what intellectual historians one day will no doubt call the 'late Latour' was the event that constitutes our present. Climate change is one of the most spectacular manifestations of it, though not the only one. The destruction of biodiversity, the reduction of the undeveloped surface of the earth, microplastic pollution, and so on, might all be included. As always, the problem is to properly understand the problem itself. The urgency of the present lies in understanding exactly what specific problem it poses. Latour arrived at a clear statement on this point: it is a question of knowing how to bring back within planetary limits a certain mode of terrestrial habitation which has been called modernity.

In the end, his whole project has consisted in the idea of *relativising the moderns*. The relevance of the term 'modernity' may appear doubtful. Indeed, many great minds, one will recall, have tried to say something clear on this point, from Baudelaire to Foucault, passing through Weber, Durkheim, Heidegger, Arendt, Blumenberg, Habermas, Lyotard, Koselleck, Beck, and so on. Yet these are only the ones who have been most explicit on the subject, and the results have been far from convincing.

It would be tempting, therefore, to drop the term and talk about something else, for example, capitalism, the industrial world, colonisation, or whichever well-known historical process or event. Latour stands out from such attempts through the paradoxical firmness with which he always held on to the enigma of the modern.

We have never been modern means two things at the same time. First, as 'moderns' we are not exceptional or radically different from all that has taken place, but are nonetheless different. Second, 'modernity' is a word that prevents an accurate description of this difference, this specificity, and its actual features. It is an event that occurred first in some societies, and which then extended, through colonisation and then decolonisation, to all the Earth's inhabited lands, before finally swallowing the entire planet away in its racing fury.

We may doubt the existence of a great event dividing history in two, with the 'moderns' on one side and all other forms of human existence on the other – *the West and the rest*, as it is said ironically in English. However, we must recognise that a great event of a planetary nature has indeed taken place. It is enough to examine the details of the so-called Great Acceleration, or to concern oneself with the discussions among geologists about the exact dating of the Anthropocene, to realise that something did in fact happen between the end of the eighteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century, which brought about a radical break in the lives not only of some human societies, but of all terrestrial beings, human and non-human.

Once again, climate change stands as the clearest symbol of this event to the collective conscience. How-

* A longer version of this text was originally published as 'Bruno Latour: une mort à contre-temps, une œuvre pour l'avenir', AOC, 11 October 2022, <https://aoc.media/opinion/2022/10/10/bruno-latour-une-mort-a-contre-temps-une-oeuvre-pour-lavenir/>.

ever, the very expression ‘sixth extinction’ used to characterise what is happening to the world’s biodiversity says something about the space of comparability of this event of which we are the contemporaries. This is because our present differs from others in a way that is comparable to only five events that have taken place in the 5 billion years of the Earth’s history. Of course, some discuss the relevance of the word ‘sixth extinction’, but the very fact that it is being discussed itself gives an idea of the horizon in which this discussion is taking place. It is measured in billions of years.



Latour’s originality in the contemporary intellectual field lies in the fact that he never gave up the profound conviction that something had indeed happened but we are unable to describe it. The word ‘modernity’ is for him essentially the name of a question rather than an answer. If it is preferable to other terms (capitalism, anthropocene, industrialism, technoscience, etc.), it is precisely because it is more obscure, more debatable, more controversial. Because of this, it forces us not to rush into believing that we have understood the question. It has an in-built way of blocking any correct description that one may try to give it, quite simply because ‘mod-

ernity’ means ‘that which is necessary if one wants to be contemporary to one’s own history’.

Latour never stopped questioning this way of taking the modern at face value. The process of modernisation is no doubt a fact, but one that remains enigmatic. On the other hand, the notion of the necessity of modernisation, that it is a simple response to the intrinsic needs of the human soul or the inevitable necessities of ‘development’, is propaganda. This is not just normatively debatable, but above all descriptively unacceptable because it occludes an accurate description of the event which must be related to its *contingency*. We have never been modern means that it has never been necessary that we become modern.

Although it might not be found in that form in Latour’s text, this is what I mean by the expression *relativising the moderns*. It means to describe precisely which choice defines modernity and to contrast it with other possible choices. These other possible choices may be consistent with each other, perhaps even capable of co-existing with the one that has been made. This is the sense in which we should understand his early work on the sciences. The great myth surrounding the invention of modern science consists in the basic notion that very intelligent and intellectually free people such as Galileo or Newton found a way to describe reality as it is without letting their prejudices or superstitions interfere with their thinking.

To practice an anthropology of science, as Latour proposed in his first book with Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, first published in English in 1979, requires that one set aside this myth in order to describe what scientists do at work.² Unsurprisingly, we do not find many people trying to get rid of their prejudices to confront a naked reality. On the contrary, what we see are people who employ a lot of ingenuity and energy to produce realities of a very particular kind: realities made up of scientific objects and facts. The molecular formula of the hormone that Professor Guillemin was trying to identify in the laboratory where Latour undertook his first ethnographic fieldwork about the moderns corresponds to an entity of a quite different sort from that of the bee spirits ‘established’ by the practices of the Amazonian shaman Davi Kopenawa.³ This entity is not more real, but otherwise real. This difference certainly gives it an unparalleled grip on the world. It allows it to make alli-

ances with a wider variety of interests and thus acquire power and authority, but not with all interests. Such a reality comes at the cost of a choice, of a selection, or sometimes, even often, a destruction.

Until the end of his life, I believe, Latour's whole question was to work out if these different realities could coexist. Beyond this, the question was of knowing if such a plurality of realities could help us establish a more just relationship with reality in general, by giving up our belief that there could be something other than this plural matrix. The properly *metaphysical* horizon of Latour's work thus lies in the sense that his work answers quite an old philosophical question: in what does *being* consist?⁴

The great misunderstanding regarding the expression 'to relativise' comes from believing that when one relativises something one is trying to take away part of its dignity, whereas one is simply trying to describe it more accurately, indeed, to define this very dignity with greater rigour by *contrasting* it with the alternatives. It is for love of the sciences and, in a certain manner, for love of the moderns that Latour has sought to relativise them: to show what about them was so singular, so original, so irreplaceable, without needing to think that all branches of knowledge should become scientific or that all forms of life should become 'modern'.

It should not be forgotten that Latour forged this intellectual project of an anthropology of modernity in Africa, or more precisely in the Ivory Coast following its final decolonisation. Cooperating with the authorities, he had been tasked with writing a report for ORSTOM on the difficulties that companies encountered in 'Ivorising' their personnel, and it was during this time that the central idea of this project emerged.⁵

This text involves a wide-ranging investigation into racism and the aporias of 'modernisation', showing the extent to which modernisation is inseparable from colonisation. To relativise the modern is also to grasp at what cost modernisation was implemented within the capillaries of the collective structure of empire, through what modes of translation, violence and misunderstanding it imposed itself as the only viable future for these societies. Latour often mentioned that he came up with his project of an anthropology of the moderns when he realised that one could turn the tools anthropologists use to describe 'non-modern' societies – their 'rituals', 'beliefs', and 'customs' – against the great institutions of modern-

ity itself: science, technology, law, religion, politics, and so on. We could say that the fundamental presupposition of Latour's entire work (like that of Lévi-Strauss, with which it shares many features) is decolonisation – how to fully decolonise our modes of thinking.⁶

The colonial question is thus the first context to which the project of relativising modernity is applied. But Latour's work would not be what it is for us today had he not acknowledged very early on that a second context justifies the urgency of such an undertaking: the 'ecological' question, or more precisely the 'eco-planetary' question. It should be recalled here that it was in *We Have Never Been Modern*, published just after the fall of the Berlin Wall at the start of the 1990s, that Latour explained that global warming – whose reality was beginning to be accepted around the time of the international climate negotiations that would lead to the Rio Summit – constituted now an unavoidable aspect of any reflection on modernity. 'In Paris, London and Amsterdam, this same glorious year 1989 witnesses the first conferences on the global state of the planet: for some observers they symbolize the end of capitalism and its vain hopes of unlimited conquest and total dominion over nature.'⁷ At the very moment when the world is no longer divided into two blocs and the Euro-American 'model' faces no more internal obstacles, an external frontier appears – what Latour would go on to call 'planetary limits'. The modern project comes up against a wall which does not separate two portions of the Earth, but which divides the Earth itself from its own fragility. It will later be said that it would take 5.2 planets for the American way of life to be extended to all of humanity. There is, in other words, no room for the 'modern' project.

In this way, the expression *relativising the moderns* changes its meaning. It is no longer a question of knowing what particular kinds of realities or arrangements of humans and non-humans as opposed to others the moderns produce. The question is no longer that of defining these beings in a more realistic manner. It is rather that of grasping what sort of *terrestrials* these beings are, in what ways such beings are linked into the terrestrial order so that they are able to construct a way of life. It is also about understanding what all of this does to the Earth, which is at once a condition and an effect of these forms of terrestrial habitation. It took several decades for Latour to arrive at a clear formulation of this problem,

though one cannot say that this later version of his reflections on the subject are where he would have stopped had he been able to continue working. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that during the last 15 years of his life he devoted his intense intellectual energy to developing this problem as rigorously as possible, something he did in collaboration with a considerable number of people around him, as he always knew how to do. In the end, he developed a formula of this kind: the challenge of the present is to embed modern ways of life back within these terrestrial limits. To use an expression of my own, the moderns are deterritorialised terrestrials who inhabit the Earth while forever ignoring, neglecting, their own terrestrial condition. The challenge of the present is to reterritorialise them.

We must be careful, however, not to interpret this formula as if it implied that the Earth was a finite reality, with fixed boundaries like the unmovable walls of a house. The Earth, what Latour calls Gaia, is an active, dynamic, and historical entity, which reacts to the actions of the terrestrial beings who live on it and from it.⁸ The point, therefore, is not to resign ourselves to these external limits, but rather to become more intensely and, precisely, more sensitive to our own terrestrial condition; that is to say, to the way in which we influence planetary dynamics by how we occupy the Earth, which we have made our terrestrial dwelling. The present situation is certainly distressing and full of present and future grief. Species are dying out, landscapes are changing faster than the living can cope with, forests are burning, war is once again knocking on our doors ... Yet this situation is also something of an opportunity and this ambivalence is itself typically *modern*.

For perhaps the first time in the history of humanity, we have the possibility of living in a closer, more intimate relationship with this planetary condition, a condition which is in fact ours, which has always been ours, and which has been so since there has been life on Earth. Latour, in fact, never missed an opportunity to remind us that it is the living who have created the Earth's climate, that it was bacteria that modified the terrestrial atmosphere so that other living beings could flourish there. This is the lesson he drew from James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, from whom he borrowed the word 'Gaia' to designate precisely this feedback between the whole and its parts, the Earth and its terrestrial beings. We now know

that by choosing a terrestrial dwelling for ourselves we choose an Earth. The question, then, is what kind of Earth?



There was a lot of confusion when Latour recently began to talk about a plurality of Earths, saying for example that Trump's Earth was different from ours.⁹ Some responded in outrage: 'What! Isn't there only one planet? Isn't this an astronomical fact, the whole basis of the Earth System Sciences you claim to be so fond of? This is where your relativism leads us! We thought you'd calmed down with this nonsense but here you are again making absurd claims. There are no multiple realities, just as there are no multiple Earths. There's only one reality: scientific reality. And only one Earth: the one studied by the Earth sciences.' However, Latour was much closer to what these sciences teach when suggesting that the Earth should not be seen as locked in a fixed state that could be defined by certain biogeochemical parameters. Instead, it is a system that never achieves equilibrium and that is characterised by an irreducible historicity. Each of its states is best described as part of a set of alternative futures coexisting with one another as possibilities.

Of course, there is only one Earth, but this uniqueness is precisely one to which belong multiple alternative

but coexisting futures, some of which may be incompatible with others. To be terrestrial is to have to choose one's territory (*terre*). We are still terraforming the Earth. The problem today is that we are terraforming it in reverse, or rather the problem is that the way we inhabit the Earth in the present destroys the possibility of other terrestrials envisioning other projects for its future, other lines of terraformation. The warming of the Earth by 3 or 4 degrees will not only destroy a very large number of terrestrial beings, human and non-human, but will also impose a particular condition of existence on many generations of terrestrials, for hundreds, even thousands or tens of thousands of years. Greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will take a long time to disappear, radioactive waste will in some cases remain for hundreds of thousands of years, synthetic molecules may substantially modify the chemical structures of the Earth in an irreversible way and with unpredictable consequences. The moderns have mortgaged the future of the Earth.

Landing the moderns means reopening the plurality of terrestrial projects. It is also to reflect on the conditions in which modernity could coexist on the same Earth with other forms of terrestrial dwelling, without eradicating or subjugating them. The uniqueness of the Earth would in this sense be a diplomatic uniqueness. The Earth would be precisely what a plurality of terrestrial projects must necessarily *share*. Bringing the moderns down to Earth means knowing what needs to be changed in their institutions so that they stop mortgaging the planet's entire space and future. This too is a way of *relativising* the moderns. They will learn what sort of terrestrials they are when they know in what conditions they can coexist, with their own difference or particularity and with other ways of being terrestrial. They will know themselves when they know *where* they are on Earth – that is to say, what sort of terrestrials they are able to be once they have stopped thinking that they can deterrestrialise themselves.

Such a landing (*atterrissage*), I repeat, should not be seen as a sad or frustrating enterprise. It will be difficult of course, but it also offers a unique opportunity to become more sensitive to a certain truth about our terrestrial condition. As they say in English, here is a 'once in a lifetime opportunity'. I think we could say that our contemporary eco-planetary catastrophe is a kind of 'once in a species-time opportunity'. It is a unique

chance to get as close as possible to our own terrestrial condition. This can be understood in the general sense that nothing is more responsible for the earth's dynamics than the modern way of life which has 'awakened Gaia', with each particle of greenhouse gas we emit into the atmosphere contributing to accelerate warming, but it can also be understood in the specific sense that we will better understand the terrestrials we are by comparing ourselves with those with whom we coexist.

Re-embedding oneself within planetary limits does not at all mean limiting oneself, depriving oneself, but involves *gaining* something – gaining in truth, intensity, precision. By reappropriating our own terrestrial condition, we thus *add* to the world. Of course, all of this could go badly, and the odds ought to moderate our optimism. However, I believe it would be contrary to the spirit of Latour, at least to what I have gained from his texts and company, to rest satisfied with the anxieties and sadness that this situation legitimately arouses. This is something that should encourage us to read him. We must read Latour because he gives us tools to live better. In my opinion, no one more than Latour can be said to have fulfilled the great lesson of Spinoza: that there is no truth without joy. Latour is a joyful thinker.

He had a single project: an anthropology of the moderns that would relativise them. This project was unfolded through many investigations (on science, technology, law, religion, economics, politics, etc.), traversing many communities (the semiology of science, Science and Technology Studies (STS), Actor-Network Theory (ANT), pragmatic sociology, the ontological and anthropological turns, theories of Gaia ... the list is too long), founding some of them before moving on to other pastures. He renewed modes of thinking everywhere he went, while always maintaining a coherent thread, which was outlined in his great work of 2012, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*. Nevertheless, this thread relates to two historical conditions that have both succeeded and added to each other – *decolonisation* and *ecologisation* – and which define the central stakes of his project. Or as Dipesh Chakrabarty would put it: globalisation and planetarisation. These two conditions, central to Latour's work, affect all social and political questions and oblige us to develop new tools to describe the relativity of the moderns.¹⁰ This is how I propose to schematise Latour's intellectual trajectory in the hope that it will serve as

a little portable map for anyone wishing to embark on it: it is an enormous enterprise that seeks to relativise modernity internally through a decolonial anthropology of modes of existence, on the one hand, and a diplomacy of the ways of being terrestrial, on the other.



Another important dimension must be added to this sketch: philosophy. Latour, in my view, seems to have always had an extremely nuanced relationship with philosophy. He would sometimes refuse to describe himself as a philosopher or he would present himself as an amateur philosopher, despite having been trained as a professional philosopher (agrégation, thesis, professorship). In fact, his true intellectual passion probably belonged to philosophy. In his later years, he seems to have made an effort to claim a clearer philosophical status for his work. His *Inquiry into Modes of Existence* should be understood in this light. Yet the fundamental originality of his philosophical approach is that it has always been *empirical* (depending on field investigations) and *pluralist* (refusing to *reduce* what he studied to anything other than what this object of study proposed as its horizon of reality). In this way, philosophy for him could no longer be seen to constitute a separate field. It exists only within anthropological, sociological, historical and artistic investigations. And yet philosophy is everywhere in his work. He himself ended up recognising that his project is fully grounded in it.

I am firmly convinced that we are yet to grasp the importance of his contribution to philosophy. I mean not just from the point of view of its contents, the theses that we may find in it, but also in terms of how he puts at stake the very status of philosophy as a discipline. Such is the centrality of philosophy in his work that one cannot philosophise in the same manner after Latour.

In any case, I cannot end this text without pointing out that while his work has clearly been *interrupted*, it is by no means finished. This singular force of action named Bruno Latour is now dispersed in his books, words, images, in the memories we have of him, in the inspiration he leaves to those he put to work and whose numbers will continue to grow. But although Bruno Latour continues to exist among us in a certain way, because of his death something is lost that is irreplaceable, something lost to all his contemporaries, who, through this very loss, become all the more contemporary with respect to each other.

One striking aspect of Bruno Latour's company and work was its unpredictability. It was enough to meet him after a month of absence to discover new ideas, unknown fields of research whose significance for one's own work would hit you out of the blue. You left with lots of books to read and things to discover. Some thoughts seem to lose their relevance with time. This was not the case with Latour. If there is mourning to be done, if there is reason to be sad, it is because there are many things we will never know because only Latour would have allowed us to discover them. He had an extremely rare ability to delve into the blind spots of our thinking and existence, to make us catch sight of a new perspective that would shift our horizons and simplify our questions, even as these would multiply, helping to awaken in us the desire, the courage to think and to act. The typical joy of Latour's thinking lay in this: you would always leave his company feeling that something in you had *increased*.

Without Latour, our collective sight gets a little blurrier, and with him we are losing a great optical device. He said recently that the great event of the year for him had been the launch of the James Webb Telescope. Latour was like a James Webb Telescope turned towards humanity. His death is like the crash of such a formidable instrument.

There is no better way to honour his memory than to continue working with joy, commitment, enthusiasm,

passion, rigour, humour, creativity, solidarity, and sorority. If one could somehow compensate for this loss, it might be by taking inspiration from what he left us, helping us surmise what he could still have given us. Such discomfort, between mourning and gratitude, loneliness and the need to go on, between an awareness of our blind spots and a determination to open up our horizons, seems to me in the end quite an accurate way to characterise our present. We are and we remain in a *Latourian moment*.

Translated by Giovanni Menegalle

Notes

1. Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
2. Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). Latour provides a synthesis of his work on science and technology understood as *practices in Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).
3. Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*, trans. Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
4. This is the central theme of *An Inquiry into Modes of Exist-*

ence, cited above, and of the text co-written with Isabelle Stengers as a preface to Étienne Souriau's *Les Différents modes d'existence* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009).

5. Bruno Latour, 'Les Idéologies de la compétence en milieu industriel à Abidjan' (1974), online at: <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/02-IDEOLOGIES-DE-COMPETENCE-FR.pdf>.

6. On this notion of a 'permanent decolonisation of thought' as a way of characterising anthropology, see the works of Edouardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro, especially his book *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014). This can in many ways be read in parallel with Latour's work.

7. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 8.

8. On this point, see his book *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), where he offers his own interpretation of the term first coined by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis.

9. He develops this particular idea in *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

10. See Dipesh Chakrabarty's recently published *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021). For a French introduction to this work, see Jeanne Etelain et Patrice Maniglier, 'Ramener la critique sur Terre: le tournant planétaire de Dipesh Chakrabarty', *Critique* 903-904 (2022).

