

Hybridism as a Dualistic View; or: A “Latourian” Paradox

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Abstract. Hybridism is the view that there are no purely natural or cultural, social or artificial objects, and the distinction between nature and culture/society/artifice is ungrounded and epistemologically impossible. Hybridism is usually taken as an anti-dualist view. The paper challenges this claim. It provides a taxonomy of hybridism(s). The main claim of the paper is that hybrids, in the best understanding of them, are still dual(ist). However, the residual, or surviving, dualism embedded in hybridism has stronger grounds than the traditional Cartesian dualisms. As a consequence, the paper is also a defense of a moderate dualist view of nature and society, nature and culture, and nature and artifice. These claims are defended also by giving an interpretation of (some of) Latour’s views about hybrids, mainly resting on a view of *Latourian hybrids*, i.e., of the specific things, events, or phenomena that Latour saw as hybrids in (some of) his works.

1. Introduction

The notion of “hybrids” owes much to Bruno Latour’s views¹. Latour started exploring hybrids in *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes. Essais d’antropologie simétrique* (1991)². In this and his later works, however, Latour’s views about hybrids are at most merely sketched and often undefined³. Still, in environmental ethics we find many *hybridist* views, often focusing on the relation (or the blurring) between nature and society/culture/artifice⁴. As (Malm 2018, p. 42) intimates, the main hybridist claim

¹ However, for a quick detour on the notion and its usages, also pejorative, in history, see Rudy and White (2014, pp. 122-123); Young (2011). Moreover, that the notion is a Latourian notion, or a notion central in Latour’s thought, is controversial. This claim is defended in Blok and Jensen (2011), but more skeptical accounts are in Vries (2016, para. 5.3). Doubts on it are voiced in Alvisé Mattozzi’s article in this issue; a response to Mattozzi is in Gianfranco Marrone’s article in this issue.

² The notion of hybrids owes much also to Donna Haraway’s musings; see (Haraway 1991, 2003, 2007, 2016), as well as to the ontological turn in anthropology, due to Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro; see Descola (2013); Viveiros de Castro (2009, 2012). Here, I do not touch upon Haraway’s version of hybridism and Descola’s and Viveiros de Castro’s anthropological views; but see Rudy and White (2014); White, Rudy, and Gareau (2015, chap. 6). Latour refers in relevant ways to Haraway and Descola in *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes*, see Latour (1993, pp. 42, 47), and Haraway refers to and comment on Latour in (Haraway 1992). This paper is not meant to be a comprehensive survey of hybridist views in environmental ethics and politics, or in the philosophy of science or semiotics. Rather, my aim here is to give a preliminary taxonomy of possible hybridist views. An exhaustive survey of current hybridist views would require much more space than I have here.

³ See Latour (1999, 2004, 2005, 2013).

⁴ See Hinchliffe (2007), Merchant (1980), Plumwood (2001), Rudy and White (2014) White, Rudy, and Gareau (2015). Often, “nature” is opposed specifically to “society”, “culture”, or “artifice”. Here, I do not consider these specific oppositions. Culture, society, and artifice can be overlapping, but not as a conceptual matter. Societies can be considered a natural item, not necessarily an outcome of the work of culture. It is possible that cultures extend beyond human societies. Some authors consider the possibility of non-human animal cultures. Likewise, animals live in groups, and some of them may display proto-social or quasi-social behavior. Some animals perform activities



is that society (or artifice) and nature “have become impossible to tell apart because in fact they are one and the same thing.” In particular, referring to Latour’s list of hybrids at the very outset of *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes*, Malm claims that hybridism is the view that “there is no way of telling where society ends and nature starts and vice versa; everything happens across the spheres or in the no man’s land between them; the world is composed of bastard breeds and trying to cut it in halves – one social, one natural – can only be done with a sword our better judgment must now sheathe.” (Malm 2018, pp. 42-43) Hybridism is the claim that *pure objects*, and *pure modes of inquiry*, do not exist. No purely natural, cultural, artificial, or social objects exist. Consequently, the usual view of the separation among purely natural, social, and human sciences is false. We live in a world of cultural, social, artificial, and natural hybrids, and our inquiry methods should fit this condition. The words “nature”, “society”, “culture”, and “artifice” have no referents (and they never had). Hybridism is usually understood as an anti-dualist view, where nature and society/culture/artifice are no longer seen as distinct realms and separate substances, like Plato or Descartes conceived of mind and body. As these Platonic or Cartesian dualisms of nature and society/culture/artifice are standardly taken as the intellectual sources of our environmental crisis, deriving from a domineering and exploitative attitude towards nature, hybridism’s anti-dualism is seen as a virtue. Activists and environmental philosophers often invoke hybridist views⁵. Moreover, the anti-dualist implications of hybridism are also welcomed in many areas of thought. For instance, in history, geography, cultural studies, post-colonial studies, science and technology studies, philosophy, anthropology and semiotics, many put forward similar claims to the effect that hybrids and hybridity are the lenses to understand contemporary or modern reality and specific objects of inquiry⁶.

In this paper, I challenge the view that hybridism, or hybridism applied to the doublet nature vs. society/culture artifice, has the anti-dualist implications usually ascribed to it. I provide a taxonomy of hybridism(s), understood as a family of views of what is natural and what is not natural, or of what is nature and of what nature is not, as well as of the boundaries of nature and society, nature and culture, nature and artifice. Based on this, I defend the somewhat paradoxical claim that hybrids, in the best understanding of them, are still dual(ist). Thus, hybridism is not the radical rupture of the traditional dichotomies that some authors maintained it is. However, it is my contention that the residual, or surviving, dualism embedded in hybridism has stronger grounds than the traditional Cartesian dualisms. As a consequence, this paper is also a defense of a moderate dualist view of nature and society, nature and culture, and nature and artifice. I defend these claims also by giving an interpretation of (some of) Latour’s views about hybrids, mainly resting on a view of what I call Latourian hybrids, i.e., of the specific things, events, or phenomena that Latour saw as hybrids in (some of) his works. The interest of this for a general audience is that a notion used in the general discussion to defend a supposedly anti-dualist view of nature and society/culture/artifice turns out to be (at least residually) dualist. Moreover, the audience interested in Latour’s view can find in what follows a reading of (some of) Latour’s usage of the notion “hybrid”, and a Latourian view of hybrids⁷.

that can be likened to human artifice – for instance, beavers build dams. Here, I do not consider these issues. For the sake of this paper, I assume that there is a clear distinction between nature, on the one hand, and society, culture, and artifice, on the other – be the latter human or non-human. Therefore, in what follows I shall mention society, culture, and artifice in contrast with nature without further considering the differences among the former, and the possible consequences of such differences. Whatever I say in this article is to be understood as holding for all the members of the non-natural pole of the opposition nature/culture, society, and artifice; see Castree (2005, 2013), Castree and Braun (2001), Lee (1999), Soper (1995).

⁵ See Braun and Castree (1998), Castree and Braun (2001).

⁶ See Anderson (2022), Burke (2009), Kraidy (2005), Pieterse (2018), Whatmore (2002) and the other articles in this issue.

⁷ I say a “Latourian view” to stress the fact that the view of Latourian hybrids put forward in § 3 below is not meant to be an interpretation of *Latour’s* views, but rather a view inspired by some of *Latour’s* views of hybrids. Indeed, the thought is that this kind of view is what some of *Latour’s* works inspired to authors dealing with environmental issues.



The paper develops as follows. In §2, I provide a taxonomy of hybridist views and of the different claims embedded in them. In §3, I consider Latour hybrids, i.e., the objects, events, and phenomena that Latour regarded as instances of hybridity in (some of) his works, with the aim of singling out the unifying features of them, thereby showing how Latour anticipated and embedded the specific hybridist views spelt out in §2. In § 4, I illustrate the novel features of a Latourian hybridist dualism, giving an initial defense of it. §5 concludes.

2. Hybridism(s); or: the dualistic residue

In this section, I list the main hybridist views and the claims embedded in them. Based on this, I show that many forms of hybridism are still dualist. Only an extreme form of ontological hybridism is fully dualist. As clarified below, ontological hybridism is the view that reality is composed of hybrids, and the latter are wholly unified, as their components have no qualitative differences.

Roughly put, hybridism is the view that the usual distinctions between nature and culture, nature and artifice, and nature and society are somewhat problematic. This is a rather general claim that can be further spelt out⁸. (I shall call this claim *general hybridism*, GH). In this section, I list some specific versions of GH.

GH may amount to contending that

the distinctions between nature and society/culture/artifice cannot accurately be drawn. There is no epistemologically valid or conceptually sound way to tell apart nature and society/culture/artifice.
(I shall call this claim *general epistemological hybridism*, from now on GEH).

GEH concerns our knowledge and our theories. It amounts to saying that we cannot know whether and how there are separate ontological spheres in our reality, i.e., whether and how nature and society/culture/artifice are distinct entities. GEH should not be conflated with a different claim that can be put as follows:

pure methods of inquiry (i.e., theories dealing exclusively with nature or exclusively with society/ culture/ artifice) are impossible. There is no way to study nature without considering its relations with society/culture/artifice and vice versa.
(I shall call this claim *general methodological hybridism*, from now on GMH).

GMH does not strictly entail GEH. Even if no pure methods of inquiry are possible, there may be an epistemologically accurate distinction between nature and society/culture/artifice. GEH is the claim that our notions of nature and society/culture/artifice can be conceptually blurred or indistinguishable. By

I am taking Latour as a source of the hybridisms listed in § 2, but I am not mean to claim conclusively that Latour explicitly endorsed one of these hybridist views, even though I sketch some arguments to this effect. On Latour's view of hybrids, see the other articles in this issue, in particular Alvis Mattozzi's and Gianfranco Marrone's ones.

⁸ Here, I partly rely on Malm (2018, chap. 2). Malm distinguishes between ontological and methodological hybridism, and the views he labels this way correspond roughly to my GOH, GEH and GMH; see Malm (2018, p. 45). Malm claims that hybridisms are still forms of Cartesian dualisms. He argues that any talk of the mixture of nature and society presupposes that they are "categories located a universe apart", and "unlike each other." (Malm 2018, p. 47) I borrow this argument, in the main text, but I also try to make it more refined and to show its limits. Some forms of non-dualist, or less dualist, hybridism are possible, as I say concerning what I call the strong unification thesis.



contrast, GMH says that even if a conceptual distinction between nature and culture/society/artifice is possible (hence, GEH is false), any informative study of them should extend across different conceptual spheres. This happens for many subjects of inquiry. For instance, historical facts cannot adequately be studied without considering geographical facts, political facts without social facts, etc. Indeed, the methodological claim presupposes that the epistemological claim is false. One can say that nature cannot be studied without considering its relations with culture/society/artifice only if nature and culture/society/artifice are two conceptually distinguishable relata whose study cannot be done without considering their relations. To put it otherwise, the pure/impure dichotomy presupposes the conceptual possibility of distinguishing what is put together when impurity happens. Impurity amounts to a mixture of elements. The elements in a mixture (at the conceptual level, at least) can still be told apart, even when mixed. Thus, GEH does not entail GMH.

In presupposing that an epistemologically valid distinction between nature and society/culture/artifice is possible, GMH is not an anti-dualist view. GMH bans pure methods of inquiry, but it does not say anything about the unification of the objects of inquiry. Indeed, as said, the very idea of impure or mixed methods of inquiry presupposes that two elements are to be mixed. This is a dualist assumption. GEH may be understood as a weakly anti-dualist view, as it implies that a dualist view of the world is untenable. We cannot tell nature apart from society/culture/artifice, GEH suggests. This does not mean there are no separate spheres in reality, though. Our cognitive or epistemological limitations do not necessarily accurately describe the external reality. The world can be dualist, even though our knowledge is not.

GMH can be grounded in a descriptive claim. It might be maintained that

nature and society/culture/artifice are linked in a metabolic relation: they need each other for their enduring existence, and they condition each other.

(Call this claim the *socio-natural metabolism thesis*).

GMH is an obvious implication of the socio-natural metabolism thesis. If nature and society/culture/artifice are mutually interdependent, their study cannot be pure. However, the socio-natural metabolism thesis is still dualist, as it assumes that there are two elements linked in a metabolic relation⁹. Moreover, the socio-natural metabolism thesis is independent of GEH. That nature and society/culture/artifice are linked in a metabolic relation does not say anything about the epistemological prospect of telling them apart. Indeed, the socio-natural metabolism thesis can also be used as a tool to tell apart nature from society/culture/artifice, by indicating the different needs that the two spheres satisfy in the metabolic mechanism.

In the above, things were still on an epistemological and methodological level, even though the socio-natural metabolism thesis aims at giving a description of actual reality. However, we can move to the ontological level. GH may be understood as an ontological claim. It may be the claim that

purely natural, cultural, social, or artificial objects do not exist in reality. Every single existing object has features we have been used to conceive of as natural, cultural, social, or artificial. Objects are *hybrids*, i.e., mixtures or bundles of natural, cultural, social, or artificial features. Elements of the world that have been standardly conceived as discrete (i.e., the natural and the social, the natural and the cultural, or the natural and the artificial parts of reality) turn out to be continuous. There is no divide between nature and society/culture/artifice. There is a unified web of life on Earth (Moore 2015).

(I shall call this claim *general ontological hybridism*, from now on GOH).

⁹ Cp. Moore (2015).



GOH is not entailed by both GEH and GMH. GOH means that the standard distinctions between nature and culture/society/artifice are not only epistemologically problematic, but rather they are fully conventional; they do not designate separate spheres of the external reality, but only human labels of arbitrary portions of it. GOH goes beyond epistemology. It goes beyond the claim that we cannot distinguish nature, society/culture/artifice. GOH amounts to saying that nature and society/culture/artifice are not separated at all. There are no separations in nature. Or better, there are no separations in the world between nature and society/culture/artifice.

GOH may be the premise for a flat ontology, i.e., the view that there are no hierarchical levels or partitions of reality. Each entity belongs to the same level of reality, and there is only one level of reality. GOH embeds or implies, then, the following ontological thesis:

reality is flat, i.e., it has no ontologically different or separated levels.
(I shall call this claim the *flat ontology thesis*.)¹⁰

GOH has often been taken to imply or embed a further claim, as follows:

hybrids are unified and cannot be differentiated or separated in their components in a non-arbitrary way.
(I shall call this claim the *unification thesis*).

Notice that the unification thesis can be specified in two alternative ways. It may amount to maintaining that

hybrids are wholly (or chemically) unified, i.e., their components have no qualitative or in-kind differences.
(Call this claim the *strong unification* or *chemical unification thesis*).

Alternatively, the unification thesis may amount to saying that

hybrids are mixtures of qualitatively different elements that cannot be separated, even though they keep their in-kind difference.
(Call this claim the *weak unification* or *mixture thesis*).

The strong unification thesis amounts to claiming that ontology does not include either nature or society/culture/artifice. The distinction between nature and society/culture/artifice is false or inaccurate as a tool to refer to the ontological structure of reality. By contrast, the weak unification thesis is the view that reality has both natural and social/cultural/artificial features. Still, they cannot be separated – they do not exist in isolation or in their pure form. This may happen for several reasons. For instance, this may be due to the fact that the socio-natural metabolism thesis holds. If the working of nature and society/culture/artifice interact with each other in a complex metabolism, then the web of life has both natural and social/cultural/artificial features that can be conceptually separated but are co-exemplified. The socio-natural metabolism thesis is a kind of GOH but falls short of the strong unification thesis.

¹⁰ On flat ontology, see Harman (2009, 2018), and the references in fn. 35 below.



General hybridism	1.General epistemological hybridism		
	2.General methodological hybridism		
	3. General ontological hybridism	a. The socio-natural metabolism thesis	
		b. The flat ontology thesis	
		c. The unification thesis	i. The weak unification of mixture thesis
			ii. The strong or chemical unification thesis

Fig. 1 – A taxonomy of hybridist views. Only 3.c.ii is fully monist. All the other views are dualist.

Among the various hybridist views sketched in this section (listed in Fig. 1 above), the only fully non-dualistic view is the strong unification thesis, in which the supposedly distinct ontological spheres of nature and society/culture/artifice are fully dissolved. The other claims still keep a dualistic residual. Indeed, the very notion of ‘hybrids’ is a dualistic notion. Bruno Latour’s usage of this notion is evidence of this. To this usage, I turn in the next section¹¹.

3. Latourian hybrids

As said, in his grand project of giving an ethno-anthropological reconstruction of the Moderns, Latour frequently used the notion of ‘hybrids’. Latour regarded modernity as a paradoxical and simultaneous denial and fabrication of hybrids. Modernity, he claims, turns around a sort of cultural Constitution, a fundamental legislative chart regulating basic cultural issues, such as the demarcation between natural and social sciences, or sciences of nature and science of politics. The modern Constitution has been set at the beginning of the modern age, when Bacon, Galilei and Newton renovated natural sciences’ methodology, by overthrowing Scholasticism and the mixture between natural history, alchemy and theology¹². The modern Constitution’s main tenet is that nature and society/culture/artifice should be separated into two distinct epistemological, methodological, and ontological spheres. This super-imposed and arbitrary separation hides hybrids, i.e., mixtures of nature and society/culture/artifice, thereby denying their existence and positing an inexistent purity, the purity of nature on one side and politics on the other.

However, modernity’s separation of nature and culture/society/artifice increases the number and the spread of hybrids, as they are unavoidable and necessary to purification itself because the whole enterprise of modern purification is hybrid, being an epistemological stance grounded in political reasons. In *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes*, Latour mentions the discussions between Boyle and Hobbes and their respective views of politics and natural sciences (and of the representation of nature and of citizens) as instances of the purification attempt of modernity. Latour maintains that modernity’s purification is increasingly precarious, and hybrids proliferate. But, as hybrids have always existed, we have never been modern, Latour claims. The modern Constitution is a failed attempt to deny the

¹¹ But consider the *caveats* voiced at the end of § 1 and in fn. 7.

¹² In *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes*, Latour focusses on Boyle and Hobbes; see Latour (1993, para. 2.2. and 2.3.). Here, I am assuming that Latour’s view of them can be easily extended to the intellectual climate and the other founding fathers of the so-called Scientific Revolution; cp. Blok and Jensen (2011, p. 56), Elam (1999, p. 9).



pervasive hybridity of the world. The constitution of modernity “simultaneously forbids and allows” hybrids (Latour 1993, p. 70)¹³.

Here, I’m not aiming to develop an account or an interpretation of Latour’s view of modernity, nor am I interested in examining the role of the notion of “hybrids” in Latour’s thought or of its meaning in relation to other concepts Latour employs, such as ‘network’, ‘actor/actant’, ‘quasi-objects’, and so on. As already said, this is not an article *on* Latour. My focus is on *Latourian* hybrids understood as the specific objects that Latour labelled as such, in isolation from his supposed theoretical engagement and claims. I’m not interested in and agnostic on the interpretive-cum-theoretical issues of whether Latour’s mention of ‘hybrids’ is only an unlucky approximation to his view of actants or networks¹⁴. It is my contention that listing the various kinds of objects that Latour calls hybrids in *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes* is of independent interest, given the influence that Latour’s views had on later hybridisms. To put it otherwise, I assume that Latourian hybrids are what many later authors thought of when developing their hybridist views. In addition, Latourian hybrids shed light on the content of later hybridist views, sometimes better than their official statements. Moreover, a survey of Latourian hybrid shows in an evident way the dualist assumptions of most hybridist views (I shall focus on this in § 3.2. below). In the next subsection, I provide a taxonomy of the items that Latour calls ‘hybrids’ in his *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes*¹⁵. In § 3.2. below, I sketch a reconstruction of some of Latour’s ideas on the nature of hybrids. I contend that Latour’s view of hybrids is still dualist.

3.1. A survey of Latourian hybrids

Hybrids appear at the very outset of *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes*, in a section entitled “The Proliferation of Hybrids”. In a characteristically brilliant passage, Latour introduces hybrids by listing them:

On page four of my daily newspaper, I learn that the measurements taken above the Antarctic are not good this year: the hole in the ozone layer is growing ominously larger. Reading on, I turn from upper-atmosphere chemists to Chief Executive Officers of Atochem and Monsanto, companies that are modifying their assembly lines in order to replace the innocent chlorofluorocarbons, accused of crimes against the ecosphere. A few paragraphs later, I come across heads of state of major industrialized countries who are getting involved with chemistry, refrigerators, aerosols and inert gases. But at the end of the article, I discover that the meteorologists don’t agree with the chemists; they’re talking about cyclical fluctuations unrelated to human activity.

[...] The same article mixes together chemical reactions and political reactions. *A single thread links the most esoteric sciences and the most sordid politics*, the most distant sky and some factory in the Lyon suburbs, dangers on a global scale and the impending local elections or the next board meeting. [...] On page six, I learn that the Paris AIDS virus contaminated the culture medium in Professor Gallo’s laboratory; that Mr Chirac and Mr Reagan had, however, solemnly sworn not to go back over the history of that discovery; that the chemical industry is not moving fast enough to market medications which militant patient organizations are vocally demanding; that the epidemic is spreading in sub-Saharan Africa. Once again, heads of state, chemists, biologists, desperate patients and industrialists find themselves caught up in a single uncertain story *mixing biology and society*. On page eight, there is a story about computers and chips controlled by the Japanese; on page nine, about the right to keep frozen embryos; on page ten, about a forest burning, its columns

¹³ See Latour (1993, 2013). On Latour’s grand project of an anthropology of modernity, and on *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes*, see Elam (1999), Harman (2009, p. 57), Vries (2016, chap. 5).

¹⁴ The interested reader can find insightful analyses of the role and meaning of the notion of “hybrids” within Latour’s overall views in Mattozzi’s and Marrone’s articles in this issue, as well as in Elam (1999).

¹⁵ I sketched a taxonomy of Latourian hybrids also in Pellegrino (2021), for different purposes. Similar taxonomies, in different contexts, are in Mattozzi’s and Marrone’s articles in this issue. See also Holy-Luczaj and Blok (2019).



of smoke carrying off rare species that some naturalists would like to protect; on page eleven, there are whales wearing collars fitted with radio tracking devices; also on page eleven, there is a slag heap in northern France, a symbol of the exploitation of workers, that has just been classified as an ecological preserve because of the rare flora it has been fostering! On page twelve, the Pope, French bishops, Monsanto, the Fallopian tubes, and Texas fundamentalists gather in a strange cohort around a single contraceptive. On page fourteen, the number of lines on high-definition television bring together Mr Delors, Thomson, the EEC, commissions on standardization, the Japanese again, and television film producers (Latour 1993, pp. 1-2).

While the naïf reader can be struck by the literary effects of the list, and by the image of Latour reading his newspaper (such an atypical start for an academic essay), Latour immediately gives his authoritative unifying interpretation of the list. The scattered items listed above are all instances of the hybrid mixture of culture and nature. Those “multiplying hybrid articles,” Latour points out, “sketch out imbroglios of science, politics, economy, law, religion, technology, fiction.” In other words, in these hybrids, “all of culture and all of nature get churned up again” (Latour 1993, p. 2). Latourian hybrids, then, are mixtures of different epistemological fields – nature and culture, or, better, natural and social and human sciences or of nature and society. Latour puts forward a version of GMH (see Latour 1993, pp. 30, 41). This is hybridity as a *mixture of methods or epistemological fields*. This view of hybridity is apparent when Latour mentions his previous work in science studies and the notion of network and when he challenges the artificial distinctions between epistemology, social and human sciences (in Latour 1993, para. 1.4., 1.5.). Likewise, this is the kind of hybridity at work when Latour reconstructs Boyle’s air pump as a way of bringing into the stage new non-human actants with “new semiotic powers” and able to give rise to a “new form of text, the experimental science article, a hybrid between the age-old style of biblical exegesis – which has previously been applied only to the Scriptures and classical texts – and the new instrument that produces new inscriptions” (Latour 1993, pp. 23-24)¹⁶. The modern Constitution instantiated in and inaugurated by Boyle’s purification of natural science and Hobbes’ invention of politics is a wrong methodological view of inquiry, because it is “a classificatory device for dissimulating the inadmissible origin of the natural and social entities from the work of mediation down below” (Latour 1993, p. 73). Contrary to the purification dreams of moderns, “we know nothing about the social that is not defined by what we think we know about the natural, and viceversa” (Latour 1993, p. 122). Finally, Latour’s version of GMH is apparent in his criticism of the naturalistic presuppositions of standard anthropology and his endorsement of a symmetric and comparative anthropology based on the notion of ‘natures-cultures’ (Latour 1993, p. 96). In Latour’s hands, natures-cultures are “collectives”, understood as non-modern assemblages of “heaven and earth in its composition, along with bodies and souls, property and law, gods and ancestors, powers and beliefs, beasts and fictional beings”, i.e., of what modernity would forcefully purify in the artificially separated spheres of nature and culture. However, soon Latour moves on to a sort of GOH, going from methods and epistemologies to their objects. This is clear when he intimates that modernity’s practice of translation creates “mixtures between entirely new types of *beings*, hybrids of nature and culture”, whereas the practice of purification brings about “two entirely distinct *ontological* zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other” (Latour 1993, pp. 10-11, emphasis added; see also p. 13). Likewise, discussing semiotics, Latour claims that hybrids are “simultaneously real, discursive, and social. They belong to nature, to the collective and to discourse”, and that “scientific objects are circulating simultaneously as subjects, objects and discourse” (Latour 1993, pp. 64, 67). Notice, also, that Latour describes his project as “able to accommodate the hybrids and give them a place, a name, a home, a philosophy, an *ontology*” and

¹⁶ Latour’s engagement with Greimassian semiotics and his actor-network theory works within GMH, then. It is not clear that Latour’s ontological engagement, i.e., his endorsement of GOH, is easily in harmony with his usage of semiotic language. On these issues, see Blok, Farias and Roberts (2023) Peverini (2023).

devotes a section the “variable ontologies” of mediators (Latour 1993, pp. 51, 86, emphasis added). Finally, it might be suggested that, starting in *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes*, Latour developed an ontology of actants, where reality is constituted of what the actants perform, and of the networks they are involved in¹⁷.

Latour’s ontological commitments are clear also in the later *Enquête sur les modes d’existences: une anthropologie des Modernes* (2012), where he clearly intimates that his focus is to elaborate a pluralist ontology of the hybrids of modernity: “the question of modes of existence has to do with metaphysics, or better, ontology. [...] we shall have to concentrate [...] on [the Moderns’] curious regional ontology” of hybridity (Latour 2013, pp. 19, 22). Hence, the specific objects Latour enlists in the passage above (and in the rest of *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes*) are to be understood as real hybrids items, and as displays of different modes of ontological hybridity¹⁸.

One of these modes is hybridity as a *mixture of facts and values*. Here, hybridity entails the rejection of the is-ought or the fact-value dichotomy. This unifies many Latourian hybrids in the passage above: the ozone hole or global warming (mentioned in Latour 1993, p. 50), as well as their causes (chlorofluorocarbons and greenhouse gases) are instances of complex facts whose description itself is relevant only evaluatively, and it is decidedly value-driven. We should fight “dangerous” climate change, and not any climate change. No value-free determination of danger is possible, but any characterisation of danger should provide a descriptive basis.¹⁹ The old hybrids of the supposed pre-modern age, where “natural mechanisms” blended with “human passions” and “interests”, are the mixtures of facts and values that the modernity disenchantment project aspires to disentangle (Latour 1993, p. 35). But such are, perhaps, also the “socialized facts” and the “humans turned into elements of the natural world” proliferating during the late modernity, as well as the scattered phenomena of the world of life, where the sanctity of Being shines, such as the “hydroelectric plant on the banks of the Rhine, subatomic particles, Adidas shoes as well as the old wooden clogs hollowed out by hand, agribusiness as well as timeworn landscapes, shopkeepers calculations as well as Hölderlin’s heartrending verse” (Latour 1993, pp. 57, 66).

Another mode of hybridity amounts to a *mixture of human intentions or unintentional impacts and the work of non-human nature*, or human subjectivity and non-human (supposed) objectivity²⁰. This is what Latour seems to have in mind when he talks about the burning forest, deforestation (at Latour 1993, p. 50), and the rare species in jeopardy as a consequence of it. Hybridity here amounts to a composition of human action, or artificiality, and the independent evolution of nature. When Latour mentions rare flora on a slag heap, he clearly thinks of this kind of hybrids. This mode of hybridity also extends to Latour’s mention of the “whales wearing collars fitted with radio tracking devices.”, which is still a display of the interaction between human-driven artificiality and non-human nature. Similar are the “frozen embryos, expert systems, digital machines, sensor-equipped robots, hybrid corn, data banks, psychotropic drugs, whales outfitted with radar sounding devices, gene synthesizers, audience analyzers”, which Latour also mentions (Latour 1993, pp. 49-50). Hybridity of this kind includes the proliferating “monsters”, “chimeras”, the “horror that must be avoided at all costs”, the “tricksters of

¹⁷ In *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes*, Latour also develops a sort of *historical* ontology, where entities, such as certain facts or objects of natural sciences (the main example being Boyle’s air pump), are not transhistorical, but rather have a historical development; see Latour (1993, pp. 67-76) and Harman (2009, pp. 84-85).

¹⁸ On Latour’s ontological commitments, see Blok and Jensen (2011, Harman (2009). On the *Enquête*, see Delchambre and Marquis (2013), Maniglier (2014).

¹⁹ On climate change and values in general, see Hulme (2016), Parker (2014), Winsberg (2012). On Latour’s view about climate change, see Latour (2013, p. 9; 2017, 2018). Latour claims in many places that values innervate reality; see Latour (1988, 1993, 2004, p. 102, 2013) and Vries (2016, pp. 173-174).

²⁰ Parlance of subjectivity vs. objectivity is improper in a sense, though, as one of the main claims in Latour’s actor-network theory is dissolving a traditional notion of subjectivity exclusively ascribed to humans in favour of a revisionary notion of actantial agency, to be given to non-humans. See Blok, Farias, and Roberts (2023), Latour (2005).

comparative anthropology”, and the other weird creatures of post-humanity, as well as the new actantial and social roles of the scientific data and tools in Boyle’s laboratory, and the social invention or constructions occurring in Boyle’s scientific laboratory, as well as the “accelerated socializations of non-humans” allowed, and disguised, by the modern Constitution (Latour 1993, pp. 12, 24-25, 42, 47, 50, 57, 112; see also Latour 2011).

The items that Latour calls ‘hybrid’ in *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes* are of the following types, then. There are epistemological or methodological hybrids, as well as ontological hybrids. The latter are hybrids of facts and values and hybrids of humans and non-humans. These Latourian hybrids span both epistemology and ontology. Latour endorses both GMH/GEH and GOH. However, we need more to establish which of the several possible views included in GOH are entailed by Latourian hybrids. To this issue I turn in the next subsection.

Latourian hybrids	Epistemological or methodological hybrids (nature/culture)		Network, Boyle’s air pump and Hobbes’ Leviathan, natures-cultures
	Ontological hybrids	Fact/value hybrids	Ozone hole and global warming
		Human/non-human hybrids	Rare flora on a slag heap, whales with artificial collars, frozen embryos, expert systems, digital machines, robots, hybrid corn, gene synthesizers

Fig. 2 – A taxonomy of Latourian hybrids.

3.2. Latourian dualistic hybrids

Seemingly, Latour put forward a monistic view of reality, to be contrasted with modernity’s dualisms.²¹ Latourian hybrids can appear as monads, i.e., as unitary assemblages of what modernity tried to tell apart. Or better, they are relations, or signposts of relations, nodes of a network (Latour rejected the substance metaphysics entailed in Leibniz’s monism – see Latour 1999, p. 151; Collin 2010, p. 133; Harman 2009, p. 74). Indeed, Latour himself warned his readers that hybrids are not to be understood as a mixture of two pure forms, because this would still amount to the dualism. Hybrids are not “intermediary”, i.e., links or connections between two self-standing, and opposite, poles of the modern Constitution. Rather, non-modern hybrids are “mediators”; they constitute a distinct territory that Latour calls “the Middle Kingdom”, a territory where “mediation, translation and networks” between the opposite poles occur (Latour 1993, pp. 37, 41). Mediators have creative force: they give new life (better: they give life anew, but also from scratch) to the mediated entities. While modernity consists in splitting apart distinct features of the hybrids – the social and the natural pole, for instance –, assuming the previous and independent existence of pure forms, non-modernity is a way to represent and give substance to the union of them, on the assumption that no pure form can never exist separated. Non-modern hybrids are assemblage of heterogeneous entities, where the assembled elements tightly mix up, in a world made only of hybrids. Non-modernity is the perspective through which, and the ontology where, these new chemical elements crop up and can be understood. Here, Latour seems to gesture towards what I called the strong, or chemical, unification thesis in §2 above.

However, a residuum of dualism lurks in Latour’s mediators, at least for the following reasons. First, notwithstanding the spatial metaphor (the Middle Kingdom), Latour’s view of the mediator is often placed at an epistemological level. Latour refers to how moderns “conceive” the Middle Kingdom, of

²¹ This claim is clearly stated in Blok and Jensen (2011, chap. 1), but see also Collin (2010, chap. 7).



their acknowledgement of the existence of hybrids, and their attempts to “empty” them of “any relevance by turning full-blown mediators into mere intermediaries.” And, importantly, he notices that in order to dissolve modernity, one needs to stop conceiving “exactly the same world composed of exactly the same entities” as a matter of intermediation between pure forms, and to “invert the general form of the explanations” used by the modern:

The explanations no longer proceed from pure forms toward phenomena, but from the centre toward the extremes. The latter are no longer reality’s point of attachment, but so many provisional and partial results. The layering of intermediaries is replaced by chains of mediators [...]. Instead of denying the existence of hybrids – and reconstructing them awkwardly under the name of intermediaries – this explanatory model allows us instead to integrate the work of purification as a particular case of mediation (Latour 1993, p. 78).

Then, the difference between intermediaries and mediators is a matter of explanation, i.e., epistemological, not ontological. Despite Latour saying (in a section devoted to “variable ontologies”) that mediators are events able to create the mediated entities, there is no full-fledged indication of the ontology of mediators in *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes*. Latour uses Sartrean categories, contrasting the “essence” of mediators to their “existence”, and claims that the latter precedes the former. However, it seems that the stabilisation of existent entities amounts to a historical trajectory: for instance, the appearance of the vacuum in the pump and how this is accounted for in Boyle’s laboratory, along with the purposes of this account and the effects it has in societies and knowledge. As Harman effectively says, commenting on this aspect of Latour’s view, “the essence of a thing results only from its public performance in the world” (Harman 2009, p. 66). But these public performances are reconstructed within our knowledge and appreciation of them. It seems that ontological stabilisation, or identification, still happens at the epistemological level. Harman insists on Latour’s democratic approach, in virtue of which epistemological-like relations, i.e., relations able to change and constitute the related entities, and the relation itself, can happen not only between human minds and the external world. Anything is in relation, and is constituted by and within relations, in Latour’s ontology.²² Still, this relationist ontology can be taken in at least two ways. It might amount to a dissolution of epistemology, according to which there is no rift between minds and world, and knowledge and truth are not a matter of correspondence or representation. As Harman remarks, in Latour “pragmatism of knowledge” turns into a “pragmatism of ontology”, whereby “the very reality of things will be defined as their bundle of effects on other things” (Harman 2009, p. 95).

But Latour’s relationism might also be seen as a sort of epistemologization of ontology (ontology turns into epistemology), according to which there is non-human knowledge (things “know” each other, as it were) and this is all that it is. So understood, Latour could still allow for a sort of dualism, the dualism between different roles in relations. Even assuming that things ‘know’, or affect, each other, it may still be said that a given thing affects another, even though it is also affected by what affects. A distinction may still be established between affecting and being affected. And this may be a sort of dualism (on which more below in this section)²³.

Moreover, in the final pages of *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes* Latour clearly intimates that modernity dualism is not entirely bad. The problem with it is “the clandestineness of quasi-objects”, i.e.,

²² See Harman (2009, pp. 75-76). The section on variable ontologies is at Latour (1993, pp. 85-88). On the tension between events and trajectories in Latour’s ontology, see Harman (2009, p. 65). According to Harman, Latour is a realist thinker, despite his democratic approach to entities, where there are no substances, no “final infrastructure of reality”, and reality is simply made of relations between entities placed at the same ontological level Harman (2009, p. 72). While I have no space here to articulate my dissent, I think that this view is too hasty.

²³ Panpsychism would be an elaboration of this view. See Goff (2019).



modernity's failure to acknowledge them (See Latour 1993, p. 134). Then, Latour's hybrids are not necessarily chemical blends or monads. Rather, they are mixtures of heterogeneous elements. Impurity lies in the fact that different elements are mixed but not dissolved or irreversibly blended. Latour endorses, at most, the weak unification thesis above. This makes Latour's view still a form of dualism. Finally, the new Constitution of nonmodernity announced at the end of *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes* establishes a "Parliament of things", where hybrids can be properly represented, in the double meaning of the word, arbitrarily detached by modernity. In the Parliament of things hybrids are represented as cognizable and identifiable, but also represented as political agents, whose rights and moral status should be taken into account in a trans-human democracy²⁴. Even though hybrids in their Parliament act and speak with an equal status, they are plural (and the ontology in the *Enquête* is declaredly pluralist). Pluralism is not monism, at least in the sense that plural entities cannot be seen as different instances of a unique kind. Indeed, at the core of Latour's empirical metaphysics lies exactly the attempt to give place and specific identity to infinite and indefinite actualizations of networks. This view is much more similar to a new kind of dualism, than to a homogenous monism. Latour's hybridism, then, is a new dualism, but it is still a dualism. In the next section, I'll give a sketch of its features.

4. Hybridism is Still a Dualism. So What?

In this section, I sketch the specific form of dualism that can incorporate, and account for, Latourian hybrids, and defend its virtues. It will turn out that property dualism can make room for hybrids and can keep hybridism's attractiveness.

Dualism is not a uniform or monolithic concept (see Robinson 2023). Consider, for instance, the following dualistic claims:

Substance dualism (SD): the world is composed of substances, and substances are of two kinds (e.g., mental and physical, or natural and artificial);

Hierarchical dualism (HD): the world is composed of two kinds of entities, and they are hierarchically ordered, where one entity grounds the other (for instance, substances ground properties or accidents, nature grounds culture or society, physical substances ground mental properties).

Rift-dualism (RD): the world is composed of two kinds of entities that are separated and irreducible.

Property dualism (PD): the world is composed of a unique kind of substance, but the latter may have different properties (for instance, physical and mental properties).

These claims have different logical consequences and grounds. To my purpose here, it is enough to notice that SD does not entail HD. It is possible to claim that in the world, there are two kinds of substance without positing hierarchies between them. The same holds for RD.

Now, in many of his explicit statements, Latour denies SD and HD, as seen above. In particular, Latour's *flat* ontology is an evident challenge to HD.²⁵ However, it might be argued that RD is much in the spirit of Latour's irreductionism (namely, the view that nothing can be reduced to nothing) and of the pluralist ontology stated in the *Enquête*. Moreover, it is far from clear that Latour would reject PD. Indeed, a form of property dualism might be what is needed to give room to the several modes of existence listed by Latour. It might be argued that the several modes of existence are different properties of a unique

²⁴ See Latour (1993, para. 5.5). The notion of a "Parliament of things" is central in Latour's later thought, especially in connection with political ecology; see Latour (2004); on this topic, see Harman (2014, chap. 3).

²⁵ On flat ontology, see Landa (2002, p. 51). On flat ontology in Latour, see Harman (2009, pp. 207-8, 214).



substratum. It is not necessary to claim that this substratum has the fixed standing that substantialist metaphysics posits and ascribes to substances. It might be claimed that the unique substratum of a Latourian world is the infinite network, and the various nodes and shapes of this network are its different emerging properties. In his reconstruction of Latour's metaphysics, Harman notices that, rejecting the traditional notion of substance, Latour "implicitly sides with the tradition of British empiricism and its notion that 'substance' is nothing that a bundle of qualities, and against the phenomenological view that starts with unified objects and sees attributes as derivative" (Harman 2009, p. 81). A discussion of the relations between such an empiricist position and property dualism would require another paper, or an entire book. Still, it might be claimed that Latour's denial of substance amounts to denying SD and HD, but not to denying PD. Recently, (Malm 2018, pp. 46, 55-58) suggested that hybridism presupposes SD and that PD is a plausible position, especially in environmental ethics and political ecology. My contention, here, is that Latourian hybridism is a form of dualism, and it is PD. This should be good news for the supporters of hybridist views.

The following objections might be raised to my arguments in the above. First, it might be argued that Latour is a monist, and my reading of his work is wrong. Second, it might be claimed that Latour is a pluralist, but pluralism is not dualism. Third, it might be suggested that, if hybridism is a form of property dualism, it loses its attractiveness, because property dualism has its own problems²⁶.

Here, I will not respond to the first objection. As said before, it was not my purpose to provide a detailed, philological, and comprehensive reading of Latour. I was interested in *Latourian* hybridism, not in Latour's hybridism. To the second objection (Latour is a pluralist, not a dualist) a quick answer can be given, as follows. In the standard interpretation, Latour is viewed as a monist, and his monism is contrasted with Cartesian dualisms.²⁷ But, as it is clear in the *Enquête*, Latour is no monist. His interest is in giving a nuanced representation of the plural levels of reality, without reductions. This is consistent with his empirical and ethnographic work in his early books on sciences.²⁸ However, pluralism is not necessarily an anti-dualist position. If reality is made of a plurality of entities, it might be possible that some of them are distinct, are dual, as in dualism. Latour's opposition to the metaphysics of substance does not entail monism.

As to the third objection, a full defense of property dualism would require more space than I have here. However, the dualist hybridism that I envisage here has many, if not all, of the virtues of hybridism. Hybridist views have two aims. First, to give a nuanced representation of reality, allowing room to the manifold levels of the real by representing the most diverse entities. Second, to use this nuanced representation to challenge the hierarchy and dismissal of certain entities (for instance, nature, or animals, or objects) entailed by Cartesian dualisms. This second aim of hybridism attracted many environmental ethicists to hybridist views. Hybridism allows us to give equal moral status to non-human entities, even giving them personhood or agency.

PD has room for both aims of hybridism. Objects with different kinds of properties are hybrids. Hybridity is the coexistence, or the co-inherence, of different kinds of properties. PD is compatible with the weak unification thesis. Indeed, PD can be a grounding explanation of the weak unification thesis. If so, discovering that hybridism is still a dualism is not bad news. On the contrary, it might be exactly the coronation of Latour's project of saving modernity dualism, discarding its vices.

²⁶ A discussion of these problems and a defense of property dualism are given in (Malm 2018, pp. 58-64).

²⁷ See references in fn. 28 above.

²⁸ See Delchambre and Marquis (2013) for a detailed defense of this view.



5. Concluding remarks

As said above, Latour has been standardly interpreted as a monist, and his notion of “hybrids” has been employed to give substance to many hybridist views, ranging across many fields, such as environmental ethics, political ecology, anthropology, semiotics, political theory. In the above, I claimed that it is possible to frame a plausible Latourian notion of “hybrids”. However, Latourian hybrids are the building blocks of a dualist ontology, in particular of a form of property dualism. This kind of dualism can keep the attractiveness of hybridism, though.

The arguments stated in the previous sections are far from conclusive ones. In particular, property dualism should be defended by many objections, and its virtues should be carefully illustrated. Moreover, in the scholarly discussion, there are many kinds of hybridist views. The specific dualist hybridism here sketched needs to be further articulated and compared with many alternative views. Recently, property dualism has been used by Andreas Malm to defend a version of historic materialism, where the socio-nature metabolism thesis is center stage. Here, I claimed that the socio-nature metabolism is not a full-fledged ontological hybridism, and that ontological hybridism can be a form of property dualism. These claims need further defense and specification. But this will be for another day.



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