This Is The Modern World? An expedition into ‘neoliberal’ times

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Latour (1993, 2013, 2016) suggests that The Moderns are pre-occupied with a singular temporal trajectory that seeks to resolve problems through breaking with a failed past to make progress toward a better future. Holding steady this singular trajectory requires the purification of matters into separate containers – nature/society, fact/value, human/non-human, science/politics – that then provide a basis for resolution and progress. That The Moderns have always been overwhelmed by hybridity, plurality, intricacy and impurity, destroying the possibility of neat containment, stands testament to their failure – to accomplish Modernity and to provide an adequate basis to resolve matters of concern.

In this talk I carry out an expedition into those conditions of problem resolution often labelled ‘neoliberalism’ (a term that loses as much as it gains in usage). Here we will encounter a number of market-based interventions (evidence trading, outsourcing, league tables, competitive tendering) presented as a basis for efficiently and effectively selling or allocating scarce (mostly public) resources. One means to make sense of these interventions, I will suggest, is to orient our expedition through Latour’s Modernism to engage with temporal trajectories, singularities, purifications and hybrids. And like all the best (and some of the worst) expeditions we will be confronted with questions of our own reflexive complicity in these interventions.

The presentation will begin with the EU Emissions Trading System and a Modernist drive to purify and singularise the nature of environmental problems into a more or less singular, progress-based (cap and trade) solution that is later overwhelmed by plurality. We then move to a Social Impact Bond that transforms children at-risk into a private investment fund from which returns must be earnt. Here impurity is partly kept at bay by a contract structure that promotes singularity while ignoring efficiency and effectiveness. We will end our expedition with market-based interventions in Higher Education (namely the UK REF), where The Moderns appear to run rampant, defying overwhelming hybridity by discounting the outside world through a relativist assessment system. In the end it is relativism, I suggest, that underpins this partial success for The Moderns.