

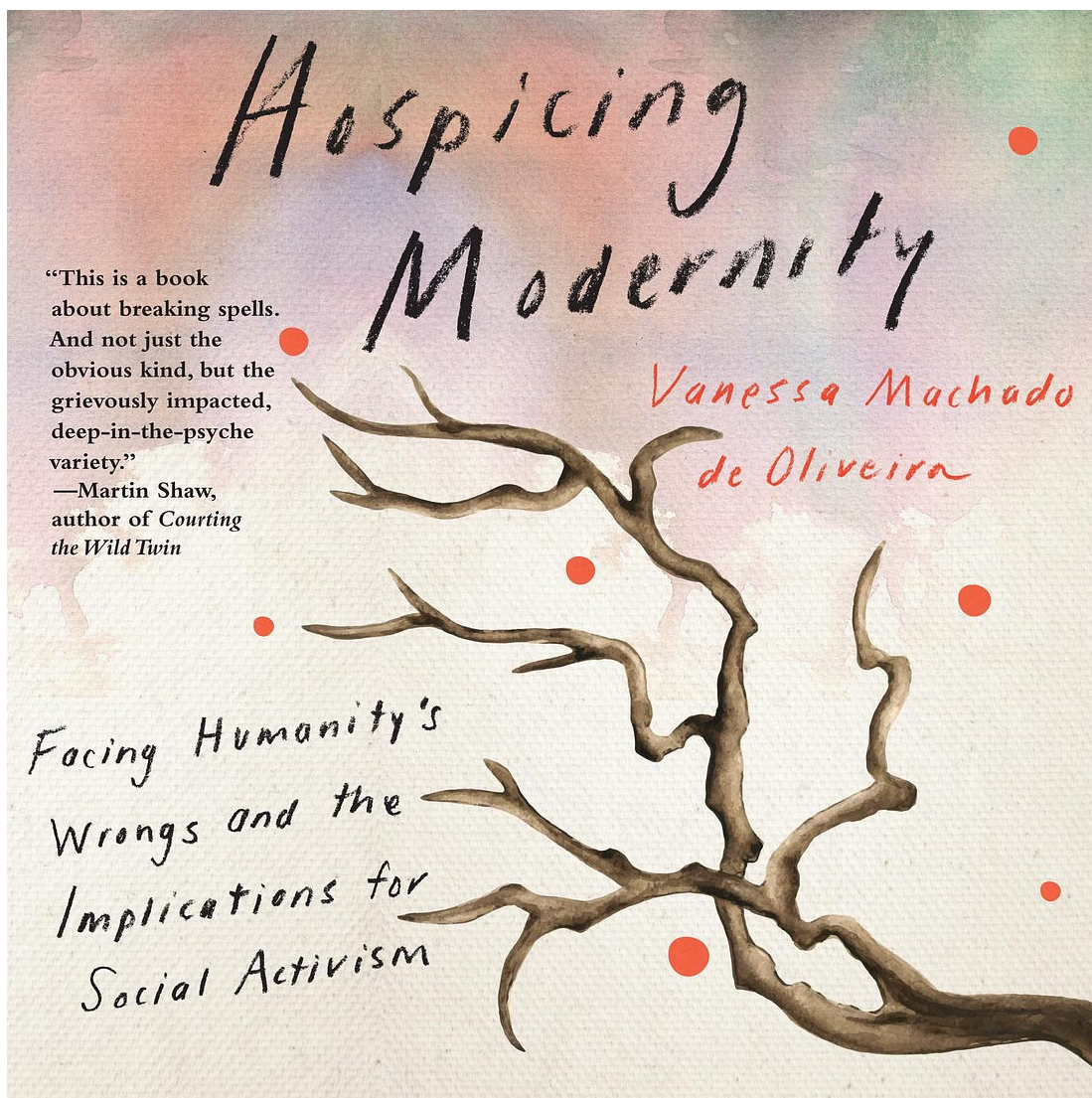
Hospicing technological solutionism: a modest primer

Reading part one of Hospicing Modernity



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The cover of [the audiobook edition](#) read by Dougald Hine

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Last week, I spent some time in my native Finland, catching up with friends and family. With a dear friend, we discussed a scenario where Vladimir Putin becomes interested in the abundant freshwater reserves that Finland has, similar to his obsession with Ukraine and its minerals. What would be the options to prepare for such a threat other than military ones, was the question we pondered. My friend put the question to me because I had expressed my view that our current ways of living lack guidance from wise elders. As a retiree, my friend was wondering how he could translate his life experience into something that would help with the Putin-freshwater dilemma.

After a bit of a struggle, I came up with an answer, or at least a particular approach to the dilemma. I'll return to it at the end of the post. For now, the important thing is that the perspective I adopted would not have been possible without exposure to a certain line of thinking, of which Vanessa Machado de Oliveira's 2021 book *Hospicing Modernity: facing humanity's wrongs and the implications for social activism* is an important example.

The inner work with modernity

I consider one of the aims of this newsletter to point you, my readers, towards thinking and contexts that you might not otherwise consider or come across elsewhere (e.g. the hemisphere hypothesis discussed in older posts). And it goes both ways: through interactions here, I hope to be directed to things unknown to me.

Every so often, a book comes around that figures in the various discussions one follows. *Hospicing Modernity* is one of those. It has been

in my bookshelf for a while, unread. I guess part of me wanted to convince myself that I had actually gleaned the main points of the book. But I always recognised that as a form of self-deception, as something to be corrected. Thus, I decided to engage with *Hospicing Modernity* with my full attention. This is also timely given that the author is about to publish the follow-up, *Outgrowing Modernity*, later in 2025.

It might just be that the timing is exactly right. You see, Machado de Oliveira is meticulous in advising who should or shouldn't read the book; for many, the idea of hospicing modernity will be challenging. A year and a half ago or so, I would not have been as open to fully questioning my past celebrations of modernity and belief in its ability to autocorrect its course.

The author warns that a potential impact of engaging with the book and its ideas is a certain kind of alienation: "what if you find motivations and responsibilities you won't be able to ignore, but no one around you will understand you any more?" (P. 40.) These days, quite often an echo of something like that lingers on my mind. In particular, when meeting acquaintances or even old friends who still occupy the world view I was also living by. I sometimes struggle, in the midst of conversations, to relate to the interests that used to be mutual, as I recognise those as something I have left behind. I work hard to be non-judgmental about it — in those moments, I just tend to become aware of the paths taken and not taken, conversations had and not had, the books read and unread.

Having chosen my path, I will post thoughts as I read the book, today starting with the first , 'warm up' part of the book. As with *Unexamined Technology* in general, I will pay particular attention to how Machado de Oliveira sees technology and innovation as co-conspirators in the hegemony that we know as modernity. I say we, as I expect that most of you who read this are fellow Global Northerners who have been conditioned and co-opted to modernity's processes — such as

extraction and ecocide — **processes that should not be considered modernity's collateral damage but rather its preconditions to exist.**

✓ **Subscribed**

Modernity's preconditions to exist

For me, this observation has been one of the gut-punches at the beginning of *Hospicing Modernity*, punches that, to be fair, the author telegraphs forthright from the very beginning. The idea of hospicing modernity is to let it wither in its impossibility. The practical implications of such a proposition can be a lot to take in. After all, Machado de Oliveira begins with the clarification that modernity is not a "what", but a "who", a multi-faceted living entity. Therefore, us with "low-intensity struggles", us who have "benefited the most and still enjoy the protections that modernity offers" (p.52) need to start owning our complicity but also seek ways of changing things *within* modernity.

The author places the premise of modernity and its colonising outcomes into the beginning of disentanglement from nature as it started taking place in the West. The divorce gained momentum from "wording the world" — the practice of labelling worldly phenomena into neat boxes with words. This need has arisen from "the desire to index the totality of the reality of the world in unambiguous language that can describe it objectively" (p. 21). Moreover, the manoeuvre has established a certain type of language as the only "possible relationship with language, meaning, knowledge — and, consequentially, with the world" (p. 21). Such a relationship champions 'epistemic imperialism', a stance according to which anything that cannot be conceptualised in language, such as indigenous notions of living in concert with the earth, is eliminated from the discussion as irrational or needlessly ambiguous.

"Within modernity/coloniality, being is defined by reason, and it is the certainty of knowing (through description/prescription) that anchors the

security of being.” (P. 22) I find the observation fascinating, and validating with a sense of weird doomer optimism. The reason being that I suggest the epistemic dimension of modernity (given shape by Auguste Comte with logical positivism, among others), as expressed by Machado de Oliveira, aligns with the hemisphere hypothesis and McGilchrist’s analysis of the emergence of modernity as a left-hemisphere dominant trajectory (in *The Master and his Emissary* in particular).

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Colonialism versus coloniality

The other gut-punches come in the form of the **four denials** that Machado de Oliveira throws at us. Before we delve into the denials, a couple of notes about terminology. Machado de Oliveira uses the term ‘modernity/coloniality’ to emphasise the distinction between colonialism and coloniality. The former refers to the forms of occupation, exploitation, and governance that historically took place during colonial rule. The latter, coloniality, is about the enduring manifestations of power structures, etc., that ultimately have trapped us in the colonial Global North vs Global South dynamic and its corrosive outputs.

It is modernity/coloniality, and how it hides its traces, that holds us back from imagining and relating to alternative worldviews.

Modernity/coloniality is “faster than thought” because it is pre-cognitive, and thus it has structured our unconscious, writes Machado de Oliveira.

The four denials

This mental gridlock becomes tangible in the four constitutive denials: hospicing modernity is about “confronting and wrestling with these denials”.

So here we go, into hospicing techno-solutionism, one of modernity's emissaries: reading about the denials below, ask yourself which of the denials do you feel the strongest about your work in technology or relationship with technology? Which denial(s) can we honestly confront? Which denial is the most challenging?

The first denial has to do with the denial of the systemic, historical and ongoing violence and of complicity in harm. For me, this denial becomes acute in the tension between the undeniable gifts of modernity, such as modern medicine, without which my son with an autoimmune disease could not live a normal life, and modernity's systemic and systematic violence — something we witness in full effect today, without any pretensions or excuses. The actions of the most powerful individuals in the world today are as far as one can get from the principles of “decentering, disarming and dethroning the ego” that Machado de Oliveira writes about as a set of the tools that help in “clearing the attic” from modernity's clutter.

The second denial is about not accepting the limits of the planet and the predominant sustainability discourse. This is where the techno-solutionism rhetoric and activity comes into play, with the belief in technological innovation as a fix for the planet's problems and limits. The denial is also a denial about the limits of the type of thinking that has led us to this point, and blind faith that betting everything on keeping everything, “sustainably”, can get us out of the predicament.

The third denial is the denial of entanglement with nature; the belief in human exceptionalism. I have written about [the hubris around colonising Mars](#), which demonstrates an extreme form of denial — a view that this precious Earth is disposable. Historically, this form of denial goes back to the Enlightenment and the need to ‘improve’ nature by manipulating its messy qualities, through scientific detachment, and eventually to notions such as private property, land ownership, food production exceeding local needs, etc.

The fourth and final denial is about the magnitude and complexity of the problems. The denials are interlinked, and the complexity reveals itself in the non-linear trajectories that modernity, as a living entity, is good at hiding. For example, I used to think that the welfare system among which I grew up in the latter half of the 20th century Finland was fundamentally a positive thing. Lately, I have started leaning on the view that at least in its present forms, in late-stage capitalism, such a system is a result of the systemic miscalculations of modernity's ethos. The miscalculations have driven urbanisation and the housing crisis, a sense of disconnection to the land and local scales of employment, amplified general everyday helplessness and lack of community — all as byproducts of modernity's desire to outproduce itself.

Confronting the denials with personal responses might be difficult in an intuitive manner. Fortunately, Machado de Oliveira adopts an exercise by Sharon Stein, titled CIRCULAR. At least for me, it has given tools to articulate responses to the denials.

In the exercise, eight patterns figure as patterns of thought and response to the fundamental issues with modernity/coloniality: Continuity, Innocence, Recentering, Certainty, Unrestricted autonomy, Leadership, Authority, and Recognition. The idea is to pay attention to the patterns, and become more reflexive about them, and recognise one's reactions with humility and honesty but also with humour.

In future posts of this series about the book, I will share my initial personal reflections on these patterns, with the aim of owning up to my own blind spots and resistances — for example, it might be a personal self-deception of mine that I write here critically about technology, but have I honestly changed my relationship to the things I criticise? This is a valid question and exploring it here out in the open might display, I hope, the type of hyper-self-reflexivity that engaging with the denials and reactive patterns requires.

Thanks for reading Unexamined Technology!

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The water past our ankles

To close this introductory post, let us return to me and my friend over a beer and the freshwater dilemma. At first, I did not have an answer, but eventually, my response drew from an observation about our relationship to the water we drink. Because the vast majority of us take it for granted that drinkable water is available by turning a tap, we do not value it in a manner that is based on an innate appreciation of the natural resources at our disposal and care for their fragility. If this attitude were to change, it would need to begin on a local level, with awareness of the value of drinkable water and its local sources. Our children would need to become aware of where the water they drink comes from and cherish it. Regardless of age, citizens would need to relearn their relationship to water (and other precious resources) via what the Machado de Oliveira calls “depth education” as a companion to “mastery education”, which alone, by itself, has reinforced modernity’s violence. Such a profound change would take generations, I imagine — a luxury we don’t have if the nationalistic, power-hungry, and resource-extracting actors decide to turn their colonial gaze on the riches.

I wanted to share this anecdote because it demonstrates the mindset I have personally reached before picking up *Hospicing Modernity*. I don’t think I would have been able to produce that thread of thought before. It’s not vital that the anecdote is about me — what it tries to convey is a reference point; a point of comparison from which you can approach the book and reflect your own experience to how I am reading it.

Such self-examination also justifies (at least to me) headlining the post and effort with the focus on techno-solutionism — i.e. I have no illusions

that my contribution to hospicing modernity could reach farther than that at this moment. To be honest, I first wrote 'contribution to dismantling modernity' instead of 'hospicing', but instantly after picking up the book again, was told off that dismantling, fixing, rejecting, etc., are the ways that modernity works faster than thought. Instead, Machado de Oliveira argues that we should be content with bearing witness to modernity's throes and offer it palliative care.

What form can activities then take, if the ways that immediately stem from our unconscious are ones that ultimately end up aligning with modernity's wrong-doings? Where to begin rebuilding the appreciation for freshwater, locally? How can we take back control of medicine production, to bring it to a local scale? With my intuitions about how to approach such questions, am I still trapped in modernity's illusions? The book's subtitle does say "the implications for social activism", so I will return to these questions in future posts.

For now, I take with me the Brazilian saying that Machado de Oliveira uses in the book: that nothing tends to yet happen when the water is at one's ankles, but when it reaches one's hips, then we realise we can swim. With the climate crisis and the fragility of modernity's machinations that have us at their mercy, such as global supply chains endangering the access to food and medicine and other critical supplies, the water is definitely past our ankles. The time to act is now, so that when the water is at our hips, we can — and know — how to swim beyond modernity.

Thank you for reading. More reflections on the book will follow!

With love and kindness,

Aki

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