



UK Health Alliance on Climate Change

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Finding paths from our predicament of a poisoned world

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An increasing proportion of people in countries like Britain are recognising that the way we live is environmentally unsustainable. Most people hope, however, that a combination of a political response (albeit belated), science, and technology can allow us to live in a manner not that different from how we live now. Indeed, with the rapid rise in renewable energy and lots of talk of achieving net-zero—not least in the NHS—many people simply assume that we will achieve a low-carbon version of our current lives. Many health professionals think that a net-zero health service will allow the continuation of much of the complex, specialist care currently available. Dougal Hine, the former BBC journalist, student of the environmental crisis, and co-author of the *Dark Mountain Manifesto*, is not one of those who think that life as we know it can continue, as he makes clear in his new book *At Work in the Ruins*.^{1 2}

Published in 2009, the *Dark Mountain Manifesto* has eight propositions. The first is “We live in a time of social, economic, and ecological unravelling. All around us are signs that our whole way of living is already passing into history. We will face this reality honestly and learn how to live with it.” The first sentence of the proposition feels even more true 14 years later, particularly after the pandemic; the third sentence asks us to do something hard that most have not yet managed. The propositions become steadily more positive and end with: “The end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world full stop. Together, we will find the hope beyond hope, the paths which lead to the unknown world ahead of us.”

For the billion people in the world who go to bed hungry every night and the billions living in poverty and suffering injustice the world as it is doesn't seem that good anyway. Perhaps we can find paths to something better. Hine does not think that the big path, the path of politics, science, and technology, will work. Rather we will have to find new paths (the plural is crucial), and we are likely to be prompted to find those paths not through a sudden understanding of the unsustainability of our lives but through collapse. Paradoxically (and also illustrating his wide reading), Hine quotes Milton and Rose Friedman, the parents of monetarism, to illustrate his point: “We do not influence the course of events by persuading people that we are right when we make what they regard as radical proposals. Rather, we exert influence by keeping options available when something has to be done at a time of crisis.”

The phrase “climate change” runs throughout Hine's book, but he is writing about much more. In a thought experiment he imagines the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change suddenly announcing that it had made a terrible mistake—greenhouse gases were not going to warm the planet to uninhabitable

temperatures. Would we think then that everything was fine? We couldn't. We'd still have our depleted soil, air filled with toxins, a largely deforested planet, mass extinctions of our fellow creatures, and poisoned oceans.

The American essayist John Michael Greer distinguishes between a problem and a predicament. A problem can be fixed. It goes away. A predicament, in contrast, has no solution. You have to live with it and can do a better or worse job. What we are living through is a predicament not a problem to be fixed.

Hine is interested in how we got to where we live now, which he calls simply “modernity.” Which, he says, “is born out of devastation: the destruction of the fabric of the living world and the destruction of the weave of culture.” Did we simply burn too many fossil fuels, or does our predicament have earlier and deeper roots? The *Dark Mountain Manifesto* has a succinct answer: “We believe that the roots of these crises lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves. We intend to challenge the stories which underpin our civilisation: the myth of progress, the myth of human centrality, and the myth of our separation from ‘nature.’ These myths are more dangerous for the fact that we have forgotten they are myths.”

Somebody who saw early the mistakes we were making was Ivan Illich, a critic of industrial society. I heard him speak when I was a medical student, and his impact on me has lasted a lifetime with greater relevance with each year that passes.

Illich observed that the advantages of the institutions of industrial society were quickly cancelled and followed by an unhealthy dependence. Cars are sold to us as freedom (when did you ever see a traffic jam in an ad for a car?) but have killed millions, made streets unsafe, polluted our air, and been an important driver of the climate crisis. Illich also noted that schooling breeds ignorance, hospitals make people sick, and prisons train criminals. (Illich wrote a lot about our relationship to death, arguing that “A society's image of death reveals the level of independence of its people, their personal relatedness, self-reliance, and aliveness.”³ Hine also writes a lot about death, and I will discuss that in a separate piece.

Illich wasn't alone in recognising where industrialisation would take us. Hine quotes a woman remembering the words of her grandmother of the Guarani people, indigenous people from South America: “the house the European man built on the back of indigenous peoples would eventually fall, and we'd better take cover when it happened.”

At Work in the Ruins has two powerful images that capture the fragility of modernity. One is the fish tank. Keeping cold water fish alive in a tank is a complex business: the water must be cleaned and changed,

the electric filter maintained, and a chemistry kit used to test a dozen indicators. (As I read this, I thought of an intensive care unit.) A common consequence is dead fish, but a river or lake does it all “for free and with ease.” We live in a fish tank.

The other is the contrast between Israeli and Palestinian hens. The Israeli hen “cannot survive, grow, or produce eggs without special shots, a special mixture of food, a special mixture of food” and much technology. In contrast the Palestinian hen has adapted to the harsh environment over thousands of years. It doesn’t need the technology to keep producing eggs, although it seems likely that it produces fewer. But when the technology collapses the Israeli hen will die and the Palestinian hen survive. We are like the Israeli hens. (As far as I can tell, Hine is not making a political point by contrasting Israeli and Palestinian hens.)

Modernity depends on science and technology, and there would have been no industrialisation without science. Science, although we tend to see it as a saviour (particularly after the pandemic), has led us to a planetary crisis. Hine is not anti-science, but he does describe it as “an ideology posing as a method.” He thinks that “the status accorded to science is mostly a sham.” Although, he says, scientists hold each other to standards of integrity that few other groups can match, they are useful when they contribute to the growth of GDP, but when their findings start to call the aims (or even the viability) of modernity into question “their voices carry little more authority in the summit rooms than those of the protestors at the gates.” I think that most scientists would agree with Hine: science cannot tell us what to do; it can never be a substitute for values and judgement.

How should we respond to our predicament? The first step is to recognise it, and that is a hard step to take. Hine argues for the centrality of stories and tells the story of the sociologist Kari Norgaard studying a Norwegian coastal community badly affected by climate change: the snow comes two months late, the ski resort struggles, and people fall through the ice that used to be solid and safe. Yet life goes on as if climate change wasn’t happening. “In some sense,” observes Norgaard, “not wanting to know was connected to not knowing how to know.” Or from Sir William Davenant in the 17th century, “Since Knowledge is but Sorrow’s spy/It is not safe to know.”

It is hard to accept that your world is ending unless you can envisage a future, a way forward. The favoured route forward is what Hine calls “the main path,” which is built largely around the concept of green growth: we can be green and rich and preserve most of what we have. Major financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (if not some Tory MPs) accept that unfettered growth, which has been built largely around fossil fuels, will destroy us, but there is much more argument around green growth.⁴ Hine quotes the economists Jason Hickel and Giorgos Kallis, who describe green growth as a fantasy born out of desperation: “It is not politically acceptable to question economic growth, therefore green growth must be true, since the alternative is disaster.” There is probably more agreement than disagreement that the route to successful green growth is not clear and depends on technology not yet developed.

The alternative to green growth for Hine is not disaster but rather recognition of our predicament and a search for not one main path but multiple paths. He encourages us to “surrender yes—but surrender to the mystery not the certainty.” We must also recognise the centrality of relationships: “we matter because we matter to each other. You are the fruit of all the relationships that constitute and arise from what makes you who you are.” The Lancet

Commission on the Value of Death, which I co-chaired, recognised this centrality of relationships and might be described, although we didn’t think this at the time, as a search for a minor path in that we advocated a rebalancing of death and dying moving it away from the healthcare system towards families and the community.⁵ We quoted Carlo Rovelli, the quantum physicist, who says that relationships are fundamental to the Universe and all life: we only exist in relation to others and “reality is made up of relations rather than objects.”

Hine ends his rich book, which like a poetic or religious text deserves multiple readings, with four kinds of work that we must undertake to find paths in our predicament. This work can be done by many, concentrating perhaps on what areas of life you know best. No one can do it alone.

The first step is to decide what to salvage from the ruins of modernity. This is serious work, but I have spent just a few minutes imagining how I might start the conversation. As a beginning I would take from the health world, the role of healer, the capacity to do a caesarean section, a few anaesthetics, morphine, and some vaccines and drugs with high benefit to safety ratios. Most of modern medicine I would discard, but some of it I would mourn, which is the second kind of work that Hine suggests. We might also take stories of open-heart surgery, intensive care, and the like with the idea that these activities might return in some future time when we have learned to practise them in harmony with the world.

The third kind of work is noticing the things in our ways of living that were never as good as we thought they were. The first things that come my mind are cars and most chemotherapy for cancer. The fourth kind of work is “to look for the dropped threads, the moments earlier in the story that have something to tell us.” I think of the wisdom of traditional healers, particularly birth attendants, and cultural ways of dying and thinking about death.

This is not all the work that must be done, and the search is not for one main path, but for multiple paths, some of which will be dead ends. Hine finishes his book with a story of how “in the best of worlds we stand near the beginning of a process that will take a thousand years, because that is how long it will be before old growth forests have returned, how long it takes for the mother trees to grow back.”

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- 2 Hine D. At Work in the Ruins. <https://dougald.nu/>
- 3 Smith R. The history of natural death is the history of medicalisation of the struggle against death. Ivan Illich, 1976 <https://richardswsmith.wordpress.com/2020/08/10/the-history-of-natural-death-is-the-history-of-medicalisation-of-the-struggle-against-death-ivan-illich-1976>
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- 5 Sallnow L, Smith R, Ahmedzai SH, et al. Lancet Commission on the Value of Death. Report of the Lancet Commission on the Value of Death: bringing death back into life. *Lancet* 2022;399:84. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(21)02314-X. pmid: 35114146