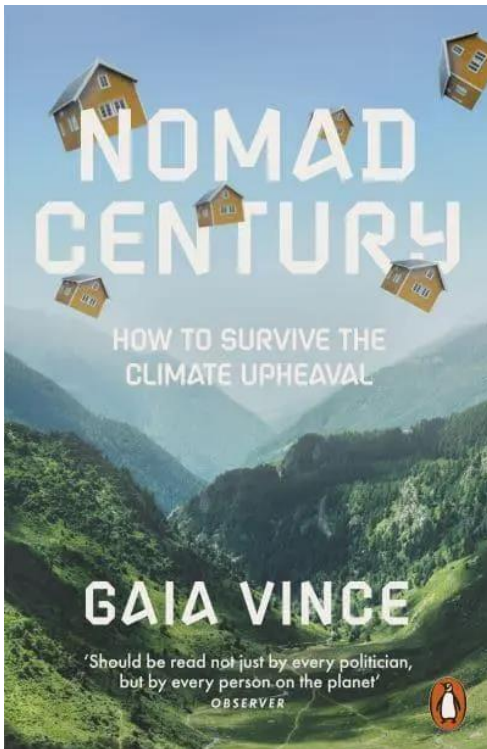


# NOMAD CENTURY: HOW TO SURVIVE THE CLIMATE UPHEAVAL

NEIL ALLDRED

Vince, Gaia (2022) *Nomad Century: How to Survive the Climate Upheaval*, London: Penguin Books.



Many of us in the development education (DE) sector have been clear on the goals of our movement: to work towards the elimination of global inequities and to promote equal opportunities for individuals, families, communities and peoples, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, gender or national status. Sixty years of research, teaching, learning and activism for the achievement of this noble goal has shaped the careers, hopes, efforts and energies of many of us. And then comes along what the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, António Guterres, the former Socialist Prime Minister of Portugal, describes as ‘global boiling’ (UN, 2023). The climate crisis

is now – officially – the greatest problem facing the world.

Gaia Vince is a senior research fellow at University College London and author of *Adventures in the Anthropocene* (Vince, 2016) for which she became the first woman to receive the Royal Society’s Science Book of the Year prize solo.

With senior editorial posts at the journals *Nature* and *New Scientist*, she has impressive credentials as a science writer and investigator. Her latest book - *Nomad Century* - makes it clear that the climate crisis is now an existential question: everything else is really secondary to the issue of planetary survival. Vince suggests that a rise in global average temperature of 4°C above the pre-Industrial Revolution norm will cause not only planetary damage over the remaining seventy-seven years of this century, but will also force mass migrations as people flee the aridity and climatic chaos of this global boiling. Her numbers and time frames vary: she believes 3.5 billion people may be forced to relocate within the next fifty years (Vince, 2022: xi) but also quotes the UN's International Organisation for Migration estimate that some 1.5 billion people will be on the move within thirty years (Ibid.: xv); and later states that by 2050 more than one billion people will be on the move (Ibid.: 209). But the details are perhaps less important than the overall message: the climate crisis is horrific but people have always been adaptable, and migration will give billions of them new opportunities in lands far away from their country of birth.

As the tropics become uninhabitable, people will seek safety almost anywhere and there are very few spaces in the more southerly latitudes: Southern Australia, Tasmania, Patagonia and so on that represent relatively small spaces for more temperate living. Northern latitudes, however, represent vast areas that Vince believes will inevitably be more conducive to resettlement: the huge spaces of Canada, Russia, Greenland, Scandinavia and other northern areas will draw billions of people who seek new lives in greater safety. Peoples across much of Africa, Asia and Latin America will be forced to flee their unliveable habitats. She cites what she sees as the positive experience of China in successfully relocating 400 million people from rural areas into huge cities over the last forty years or so, though many of us would see that as perhaps more an exercise in, and justification of, heroic state capitalism than any planned and deliberate response to climate chaos, and of perhaps dubitable value as a template for future strategy.

Readers of her book may cavil, too, with some of her estimates. The UN system has agreed to support the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) estimate of a 2°C maximum rise as the global goal to be followed, and to "pursue efforts" to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C by

2100' (Ibid.: 3), rather than watch helplessly as it climbs to 4°C. There may eventually not be 3.5 billion people forced to move but 'only' two billion or so. We may rally round, and agree strategies that will mitigate the worst effects and adapt to changed conditions. And, of course, maybe we won't.

Vince doesn't shy away from bad news:

"Even reaching 1.5°C... is no picnic. At this temperature, around 15 per cent of the [global] population would be exposed to deadly heatwaves at least every five years – that's 1.3 billion people, rising to 3.3 billion at 2°C" (Ibid.: 9).

Fire, heat, drought and floods she labels as the four horsemen of the anthropocene, and she makes a compelling case - with publicly available data, statistics, charts and citations - that the entire tropical belt, the location of 3.5 billion people, will be uninhabitable very soon. Indeed, the first 30 pages or so of her book are a seriously difficult read - emotionally rather than intellectually - because they draw a picture of inevitable and serious misery for the entire human race and the planet we inhabit. The now-famous placard, citing 'you will die of old age, I'll die of climate change', first seen being borne by a schoolgirl in an Oslo school climate strike (c40 Cities, n.d.), resonates sharply, because it states ever so simply that we, the current generation of ordinary people, are complicit in this mass immiseration of billions of our fellow citizens.

After a fairly convincing description of the coming apocalyptic events, however, Vince moves to a surprisingly positive picture of what changes are needed to mitigate the causes and effects of climate deterioration, and what can be successful. She reviews carbon capture and storage, global geoengineering, renewables and sustainable energy systems, rewilding, regenerative agriculture - even genetically modified crops. These will all help us mitigate some of the impact of a catastrophic climate breakdown. However, she sees positive acceptance of migration as the principal ingredient of humanity's adaptation to climate degradation. Other problems such as capitalism's inability to pursue goals apart from economic profit for the few (see Schmelzer et al., 2021), or the rising threat

of artificial intelligence (AI), or the worrying rise of populist autocrats and the decline in democratic performance, appear to be considered as near negligible.

A year before Vince published *Nomad Century*, Sonia Shah wrote her own paean to migration, *The Next Great Migration* (Shah, 2021). Like Vince, she argues that migration has always been a mechanism for human communities to seek a better life, to explore, to improve opportunities and to exploit new resources and new contexts. Shah, however, situates human migration in a detailed and evidence-based context of planetary ecology, reserving only the last two brief chapters to human migrations. Unlike Vince, Shah argues that migration is a genetically given, and that it will happen irrespective of the collapsing climate. She does not, however, argue that migration will be the saviour of human populations in the coming century: that remains Vince's argument, and it looks somewhat unrealistic and off-target.

Migration does have positive aspects, of course, and the wealthier countries do need to be more welcoming of immigrants, and recognise their added benefits to social and community life. But *how* are we to achieve this goal of managed migration? For Vince, there appears to be little recognition of much of the inadequacy of our current political mechanisms for socially positive and progressive decision-making. The dysfunctionality of the UN system, created after the Second World War and structured for the benefit of just five veto-wielding countries, is apparent to most observers. The need for a World Parliament is not even mentioned in the book, which reflects the more general dearth of interest in, and commitment to, systemic and structural change advocated by organisations such as Democracy Without Borders (Leinen and Brummel, 2018). Across much of the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States there are currently innumerable calls to halt the arrival of migrants - both refugees fleeing desperate circumstances and incomers simply seeking better opportunities - and the anti-immigrant rhetoric is appalling and unhelpful in any realistic strategy to help humanity adapt to the growing climate crisis. Vince, however, appears to ignore or at least downplay the political factors in her otherwise welcome rush to promote what for her should be the primary strategy of facilitating and planning organised migration.

In 2018, Andreas Malm wrote his excellent essay, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (Malm, 2021). He argued that non-violent direct action has achieved a number of goals throughout human history but the most significant social and political change has often required violent reaction to oppressive, rigid structures and systems. His essay is perhaps more philosophical than action-specific but Malm poses the question to all of us: just how far are we prepared to go in our determination to right the wrongs of the present governance of some 200 national structures and entities? How at ease have we become with capitalism's unequalled ability to nullify our potential resistance with comforts, entertainments and distractions? Is there any sincerity in our much-proclaimed desire to right the wrongs of past and present generations when we seemingly find it impossible to jettison our clearly unsustainable lifestyles? How do we reconcile our oft-asserted moral values and our essentially amoral (and thus immoral) ways of living?

In the DE sector, we have not shied away from moral issues or from questions of human rights and freedoms. Perhaps, though, we have turned away a little too easily from recognising the need for the global North to shoulder more of the burden of change than the global South. Under the administrations of Tony Blair, Bill Clinton and Gerhard Schröder, it was easy to accept the nostrum of *pain-free social justice*. Strong economic growth in countries in the global North would allow them to be generous towards peoples and communities in the global South (after investing some of that 'surplus' in domestic economies and communities, of course).

Some in the sector have long argued that economic growth in the global South would be insufficient (McCloskey, 2022). Rather than waiting to see the global South somehow catch up economically with the global North - almost impossible given the rigged international economic structures and systems - perhaps we need to see bigger and more fundamental system changes. Some kind of redistribution of global resources will be necessary. In summer 2023, the Brattle Group report on reparations (Bazon and Vargas, 2023) estimated that recompense for the impact that transatlantic slavery has had on the Caribbean islands and the countries of Latin America (and, importantly, not at all for any 'remitting' African countries!) amounts to some \$100-131 trillion!

Indeed, there are things that can be done to help poorer communities - particularly but not exclusively in the global South - to mitigate the impact of the current climate crisis. And the sooner we find solutions to the migration 'problem' that also address the equally critical issues of global inequality and historical injustices, the sooner we will be able to demonstrate to peoples and communities around the world of the need for that global perspective. Gramsci spoke of a 'pessimism of the intellect but an optimism of the will' (Gramsci, 2011: 49) and it is certainly feasible that action and agency can generate a positive focus even within clearly grim contexts and situations. We *could* begin the redistribution of wealth from the global North to the global South - and a large proportion of that could perhaps go to climate mitigation and adaptation as well as to loss and damage recompense. We *could* stand up and state clearly and firmly that a wealth tax, or an assets tax, *could* be levied for global support and solidarity. A World Parliament is not an impossible dream and we have no moral right to leave its establishment, and the resolution of myriad other problems, to future generations. We *could* tell fossil fuel companies that they must close down operations, beginning right now. Such responses would be painful for some, but they would surely constitute an infinitely better strategy than assuming climate breakdown will continue with our blessing or our indolence, and accepting global migrations as the main strategy of adaptation.

None of this is new, of course. The Club of Rome commissioned *The Limits to Growth* back in 1972 (Meadows et al., 1972). William Catton's *Overshoot: the ecological basis of revolutionary change* was published in 1980 (Catton, 1980). Kate Raworth penned *Doughnut Economics* in 2017 to translate everything into language we could all understand (Raworth, 2017). Nathaniel Rich in 2019 reminded us all that the 1990s was a lost opportunity for climate activists (Rich, 2019). And Jason Hickel has shown convincingly that capitalism is the single greatest creator of, and contributor to, global destruction (Hickel, 2023). So it is not a question of disagreement over end goals, nor is it any lack of awareness, knowledge or understanding of the dimensions of the existential challenges climate breakdown entails. Organising and managing the movement of people across the planet will be perhaps just as difficult as the struggle against climate breakdown. But surely the need for *political will* in response to the climate challenge is primordial. The question that Vince and all of us need to ask of

ourselves every morning is: what politically significant action can I do today, as an individual but more importantly as a member of the vast and ingenious human collective, to halt and reverse this deadly journey to oblivion?

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