

PAUL MORLAND

A Place in the Shade

Nomad Century: How to Survive the Climate Upheaval

By Gaia Vince

(Allen Lane 176pp £20)

As an ancient Greek poet taught us and Isaiah Berlin reminded us, the hedgehog knows one thing and the fox knows many things. Midway through *Nomad Century* – or more accurately around two thirds of the way through – Gaia Vince transforms herself from a hedgehog to a fox. It makes for an uneven book of two very different parts in which the author describes the challenges of, and prescribes solutions to, 'the climate upheaval'.

There is no doubt that Vince is most reliable as a fox. The latter part of *Nomad Century* is full of common sense and useful observations. As a fox, she is the very opposite of a catastrophiser. She is brave in acknowledging that large parts of the globe will actually benefit from warmer temperatures and that, whatever its drawbacks for humans, more carbon is good for plant growth. She recognises the benefits of modern farming methods and the fact that the more intensive they are, the less extensive they need to be, leaving more space for nature to thrive. Vast areas once tilled by humans have already been abandoned to natural flora and fauna thanks to increasing yields per acre. Vince is optimistic about advances in the generation of low- or zero-emission energy and has little truck with those who want us to rein in our lifestyles for reasons of puritanical zeal rather than ecological necessity.

In the larger, hedgehoggy part of the book, Vince makes the case that, given the impending climate disaster, we must open the doors of the wealthy, cooler north to the growing masses of the soon-to-be-uninhabitable south, welcoming the ethnic transformation of our societies. 'This is the century of unprecedented, planetary human movement,' Vince enthuses. But the vast relocations of populations she proposes are neither necessary nor practical. And they are certainly not inevitable.

Indeed, Vince herself – unwittingly, we assume – argues against her own polemic. She says that the velocity of climate change

is on average 0.42 km per year, meaning that after a century, places in the northern hemisphere will on average have the climate of somewhere currently 42 km further south. A shift in the climate of Potters Bar to that of Croydon over the course of a hundred years hardly seems to be the kind of change which necessitates the immediate shipping of millions or even billions of people from Ghana to Greenland or from Nigeria to Nova Scotia.

Warnings of places becoming uninhabitable are nothing new. We are told in *Nomad Century* about how in 2014 the small Pacific nation of Kiribati purchased territory in Fiji, since Kiribati was becoming 'unliveable' due to rising sea levels. But since then, the population of Kiribati has gone up by more than 10 per cent, its life expectancy has risen an additional year and the infant mortality rate is down the best part of 20 per cent. It sounds like it is becoming more liveable, or at least more, not less, lived in.

Forecasts can be and often are inaccurate. For example, in 2018 the BBC reported that Lake Chad had largely dried up. A year later no less an authority than *The Guardian* informed us that Lake Chad was in a stable condition or even expanding. The countries which surround the lake have some of the fastest-growing populations in the world as well as some of the fastest-rising life expectancies (life expectancy has increased by more than a decade in Niger, for example, since the start of the century), suggesting they are not so unliveable. If Vince had spirited off the region's millions to a new life in the bracing climate of Iceland upon seeing the bad news on the BBC in 2018, by the following year, enlightened by *The Guardian*, she might have been obliged to spirit them back.

There are other flaws in the argument for the necessity, never mind the urgency, of the author's scheme. Climate change, the best authorities argue, will be more pronounced in and around the poles – where she wishes humanity to relocate – than in the tropics. It is notable that even in these

days of 'climate emergency', the population grows far faster in precisely those places we are told are becoming uninhabitable than it does in the cooler temperate zones. Even within single countries, we notice the same effects. In the United States, for instance, it remains sunbelt states which continue to attract population growth. Vince would, I suspect, find it difficult to persuade retiring New York Boomers that they really want to relocate to Hudson Bay rather than to Florida. And warnings of impending calamity will not persuade them either: globally, deaths from natural disasters are at less than a tenth of their level a hundred years ago.

But whatever the challenges posed by climate change, the sheer impracticality, political and logistical, of building huge new cities towards the polar regions to house the masses fleeing the tropics is the strongest argument against the case made in this book. To convince us of the need for such a project, the author has first to persuade us that the very idea of the nation-state is an illusion born out of the Industrial Revolution and (confusingly) invented in France. She may have read Ernest Gellner, but has she read Anthony Smith and other scholars of nationalism, who have demonstrated that the concept of a nation, continuous by history and geography, goes back a lot further than the 19th century? In a Europe of Viktor Orbán and Marine Le Pen and in an America where Donald Trump might win another presidential election, Vince will have to work hard to convince politicians and electorates to abandon any notion of immigration control. If she can't convince them, her solution is to endow the UN with 'executive powers' and the ability to enforce them – the stuff of 'world government' conspiracy fantasies.

There are compelling reasons to support immigration in countries where indigenous populations seem uninterested in reproducing themselves. In Europe and North America, the demographic and economic pressures for inflows from the developing world are immense, but ultimately they can only happen with the democratic consent of citizens. Many factors, including politics, economics, technology and above all demography, will determine whether there are great population movements between now and the end of the century. Despite Gaia Vince's urgent appeal, climate change is unlikely to be among them.