

## Book Review

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**Gaia Vince.** *Adventures in the Anthropocene.* London: Chatto and Windus, 2014. 436pp. + maps, ISBN 9780701187347. \$20.99 cloth.

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Vince has been on the trip of a lifetime. Taking time out from editing the pages 10  
of Nature's journal *Climate Change*, she has embarked on a world tour. In  
*Adventures in the Anthropocene* almost every continent is included as well as  
islands as remote and expensive to reach as the Galapagos. Vince's mission has  
been to climb every mountain and ford every stream, seeking out stories of 15  
human suffering and adaptation to the multiple environmental crises of our own  
making. These crises range from climate change, to pollution, to resource  
depletion, and mass species extinction. Vince has a dream that we will adapt  
and prosper, and has gone in search of the evidence that humans have the  
ingenuity for just such an outcome to be highly probable.

Vince's faith is in what she describes as our "exquisitely adapted brain." 20  
It is because of this brain, she claims, that "Whether we raise average global  
temperatures by two, four or even six degrees, enterprising members of our  
species will no doubt adapt successfully." However, just two sentences later  
Vince tells us "...the rate at which we are warming the atmosphere is too 25  
rapid for humans to adapt" (67). But interviewing the natives of a forgotten  
village up a deserted track by the iconic Mekong River, or in the far south of  
Patagonia, or in the dangerous north of Kenya, or talking to the former  
president of the Maldives and his kids does not get us any nearer to answer-  
ing the central question: will humankind not survive, or instead adapt and  
survive? 30

Vince has ideas that are far from modest: "With sea levels rising, we  
need to carry out the geology of creating our own islands and coasts..." (190).  
"Humanity can look down, godlike, on our changes ... I feel enormously  
fortunate to have visited so much of this wondrous living planet earth at 35  
the start of the Anthropocene, and to have seen for myself the extraordinary  
diversity of life created through millions of years of physical, chemical and  
evolutionary processes." (380). When others suggest behaving like the gods,  
filling the atmosphere with airborne particulates to geo-engineer cooling, or  
spraying the sea up into the clouds to "whiten them," she is not dismissive of

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such grand imaginations. Similarly, she moots as a possibility the removing 1  
of animals' cerebral cortex so we can farm them without the guilt of knowing  
they know pain is mooted as a possibility (148).

Of course *Adventures in the Anthropocene* is far more than an illustrated 5  
road trip interjected with references to a decade spent reading top-end science  
journal papers and some of the insights collected therein. We learn that the  
author dislikes missionaries, likes scientists and engineers with a passion, and  
remains confused about why so many people have turned to revolution,  
especially the Maoist revolutionaries that she seems to continuously run into  
throughout her travels. She does learn that in some islands (in what we might 10  
considered to be tropical paradises) up to 20% of the population is addicted to  
heroin, unbeknown to the rich tourists who visit nearby; but she concludes  
that the future will be produced by “a new, socially mobile, egalitarian  
society” (390) despite not providing an iota of reason as to why, other than  
by necessity (and of course it would be wonderful if this were to occur but we 15  
may need to aid such a transition).

Some scientists find society hard to understand. Those like Vince appear  
to find society hard to understand because they assume it must be simple as  
compared to the great complexities of the articles that they read in science  
journals. After all, if you know about millions of species surely one species, 20  
humankind, cannot be that complicated? And if you have been told so very  
often just how clever you are to be able to understand science, then surely  
social science, or the humanities or whatever else it is that lies beneath your  
mastery of true knowledge, must just be a small subset of what you know?  
How hard can it be to understand people? But human societies are actually 25  
very hard to comprehend. Even though they are our everyday they are far from  
obvious. And for all its complexity and mathematical wonder (and super-  
computer requirements) science remains a subject that a bright twenty- or  
thirty-something can grasp with effort. Society may actually be the harder  
subject; and why we find it so hard to cooperate with each other might take 30  
longer and more thought to grasp. One reason why social science is hard is  
that we are embedded in it. We cannot be dispassionate observers on our own  
lives, families, cities, nations, races and species.

After reminding us that that we have yet to solve the issue that apparently 35  
half of India's population defecates outdoors (115), Vince argues that it is  
more important to “... decide what type of ecosystems we would collectively  
like, and set about creating and protecting them. In the Anthropocene, we are  
no longer just another part of the natural world, we are the planet's gardeners  
and that requires nurturing skills. But as we try to negotiate a path between  
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the competing demands of the natural world and our human world, we'd do 1  
well to remember that, in truth, there is only one living world" (261). And  
many of us are defecating outdoors in it still.

Homilies and supposed home truths, apparently hastily added to top and  
tail diary entries of parts of the trip detract from much of the detail. Other 5  
reviewers disagree. Writing in *Science Magazine* Hillary Young suggests, "The  
book's personal narrative style was particularly compelling in addressing the  
social component of environmental sustainability that is too often either  
missing or rendered as meaningless abstraction." But personal narratives tell-  
ing a series of individual tales do not address social 'components'; just as the 10  
story of a coal seam being transformed into coal dust and burnt does not tell  
us why climate change is occurring no matter how many different versions of  
the story are told.

According to Vince, humanity "... has become a super-organism, a creature  
of the Anthropocene, a product of industrialisation, population expansion, 15  
globalization and the revolution in communications technology. The intelli-  
gence, creativity and sociability of this humanity super-organism is compiled  
from the linked-up accumulation of all the human brains, including those from  
the past who have left a cultural and intellectual legacy, and also the artificial  
minds of our technological inventions, such as computer programs and infor- 20  
mation libraries like Wikipedia. Humanity is a global network of civilizations  
with a stream of knowledge already being channeled for human protection."  
(11–12). Or is it?

Only a minority of human brains are linked up through the kinds of com-  
munication technology being discussed here and some are very much more 25  
privileged than others. Almost all civilizations have, by now, been crushed.  
While Gandhi famously said that Western civilization would be a good idea,  
Vince appears oblivious to such sentiments. Hardly any of the brains of the past  
are linked through to the present and, of those that are, we have selectively  
chosen to ignore the vast majority while lording a few who put science and 30  
economic expansion on pedestals, and this book follows that lead.

*Adventures in the Anthropocene* is an adventure book concerning one  
author's personal travels and beliefs. Most books are much the same, although  
often a little more disguised in the singular driver behind their delivery. This is  
the kind of book that would accompany the TV series it appears to describe very 35  
successfully, but that TV series does not as yet exist. It is not a book that is likely  
to aid survival or adaptation much; because that will require a better under-  
standing of what is at the very center of this new age of people – ourselves. The  
Anthropocene is not an adventure; it is the challenge that results from polluting  
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on a global scale. Many of our children and grandchildren may suffer from what we have created and bestowed on them. How we did it, why we did it, and what we ~~who~~ might now do about it – requires a better understanding of history, economics, politics and geography – not physics, chemistry or biology.

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## Reference

- Q1 Young, M. 2015. “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Anthropocene, Review.” *Science* 27. [https://labs.eemb.ucsb.edu/young/hillary/PDF/ScienceReview\\_AdventuresAnthropocene-2015-Young-955.pdf](https://labs.eemb.ucsb.edu/young/hillary/PDF/ScienceReview_AdventuresAnthropocene-2015-Young-955.pdf).

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