

# Why Humanism Matters in the Fight Against Capital

*Dehumanization* is the word that best captures our present moment. How else to describe separating children as young as two or three from their parents and throwing them in cages and detention centers just because their families are fleeing severe persecution? It isn't just about Trump; it's also about the tens of millions in the U.S. who are avidly supporting his policies. *How could this be happening?*



And how could the European Union be shutting the doors on immigrants from Africa and the Middle East when just a few years ago Angela Merkel proclaimed “Wir Schaffen Das! [We Can Do This!]” in welcoming a million refugees into Germany? The number of asylum seekers going to Europe has now dwindled to a trickle, yet anti-immigrant sentiment has grown so much that Merkel and almost every other European leader has capitulated to it (do note that the latest restrictions were also agreed to by the “left” of center German Social Democrats).

And how could Israel get away with murdering hundreds of non-violent Palestinian protestors in Gaza over the past months, many of them children as young as 11 or 12, at the same time as it seeks to evict tens of thousands of African migrants who sought asylum there in response to war and repression in the Horn of Africa?

These are not the only signs of dehumanization today—I have not mentioned the massacre of hundreds of thousands by Assad in Syria, which (incredibly) a portion of the U.S. left

supports. But we only have so much time, so let's get to the key question: What explains this world-wide descent into conditions of outright dehumanization?

It's a difficult question, but it cannot be answered without confronting *the logic of capital*. Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* spoke of how capital "has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.'" How much truer is this now! The drive to augment value (or wealth measured in monetary terms) as an end in itself has led to an unprecedented level of instability and insecurity. It has destroyed the manual working class in much of the Western world, producing hollowed-out communities, shattered families, and severe atomization. Since value production generates ever-more abstract and indirect forms of domination, the dynamic that drives this process is often hard to see. This creates fertile soil for resurgent racism and sexism, as many seek simplistic answers to their problems by blaming people of color—an option that is all too readily available in a society whose entire ways of seeing has been over-determined by racism since its inception.

This dehumanization is bound to continue so long as capitalism lives on. So is it possible to develop a viable alternative to capitalism? There surely is a desire to do so—as seen in the growth of opposition to Trump and his policies. A recent poll showed that 61% of 18 to 34-year-olds say they prefer socialism to capitalism. Welcome news as this is, it by no means guarantees that opposition to capitalism and imperialism will lead to a viable alternative to capitalist dehumanization. Social Democracy, despite introducing at times some valuable reforms, utterly failed to pose such an alternative; its capitulation to neoliberalism has completely discredited it and left the field open for resurgent xenophobic nationalism and racism. The putatively Marxist-Leninist states, despite their initial success in obtaining freedom from imperialism, were no less of a failure; their

replacement of “market anarchy” with state-command economies produced some of the most repressive regimes on earth, while virtually all of them regressed into one or another form of market capitalism as their economic non-viability became evident.

The unanswered question that hovers over us all is can opposition to existing society overcome dehumanization? We have a chance, *if* we target the core of capitalism as delineated in Marx’s critique of capital. He once wrote, “When one speaks of private property, one believes he has only to deal with a fact outside of humanity. When man speaks of labor, he has to deal directly with humanity itself.” Marx’s critique of capital goes much deeper than focusing on property forms, exchange relations, and the seizure of state power. It focuses on the need to uproot the human relations that give rise to the drive to augment value and profit as an end in itself in the first place.

The key here is that value, or wealth measured in monetary terms, is the expression of a peculiar form of social labor—“abstract” or alienated labor. The value of a commodity, Marx shows, is not determined by the *actual* amount of time taken to produce it but by the *socially necessary labor time* established on a global level. This average varies continuously, due to technological innovations that increase the productivity of labor. It is communicated to social agents behind their backs, through the laws of competition. As capitalism progresses, concrete labor—the varied kinds of labor employed in making use-values—becomes increasingly dominated by labor that conforms to an abstract average. Abstract labor—and *abstract labor alone*—is the substance of value, which takes the phenomenal form of exchange-value in the market.

Value may be a rather *abstract* category, but it depends upon a very *concrete* kind of human activity: *labor that is constrained by a time determination that is completely outside*

*of human control*. Once labor assumes a *dual* form in which abstract labor dominates concrete labor, productive activity ceases to be the expression of workers' creativity, but instead becomes a monotonous, thing-like activity that suppresses it. This *reification* of the workers' concrete, sensuous activity in the drive to generate ever-greater amounts of wealth in abstract, monetary form is the essence of capitalism. As Raya Dunayevskaya put it in her book *Marxism and Freedom*,

"Marx's primary theory is a theory of what he first called 'alienated labor' and then 'abstract' or 'value-producing' labor...In essence what Marx said to [the classical political economists] was: you thought your task was done with the discovery of labor as the source of value. In reality, it has just begun. If that theory means anything at all, it means that you must deal with man, the laborer, directly...Marx's analysis of labor—and this is what distinguishes him from all other Socialists and Communists and his day *and* of ours—goes much further than the economic structure of society. His analysis goes to the actual *human* relations."

There are a large number of Marxist theorists in recent years (Backhaus, Postone, Arthur, Bonefeld, Uno, Sekina, et al.) that have focused on critiquing the logic of capital in terms of the forms of domination generated by capitalist value production. And most have done so by critiquing versions of statist or market socialism that limits the critique of capitalism to the existence of private property and the free market. More and more have come to see that the critique of capital must go much deeper than the *surface level* of society (such as property forms, market relations, and unequal forms of distribution) by dealing with the alienated mode of production and reproduction that drives capital accumulation. However, few of them connect the critique of value production to *humanism*—that is, to the need to transform the very fabric

of human relations that serve as the basis of value production. It is as if they have become imprisoned by the object of their critique: They have much to say about the limits of capitalism, but remarkably little about what constitutes an emancipatory alternative to it.

Marxist-Humanism offers a different approach. It critiques value production with full awareness that it is the result of an array of specific alienated relations, each of which must be transformed on the grassroots level to produce an exit from capitalism. The challenge is to critique capitalism's most abstract forms of domination without taking one's finger off the pulse of human relations. This what Marx called for in writing, "All emancipation is a reduction of the human world and relationships to humanity itself."

That Marxist-Humanism pinpoints the central importance of transforming conditions of labor by no means leads it into the blind alley of a "class-first" position that treats gender and race as secondary considerations. The very opposite is the case. Marxism is not a mere theory of class struggle; it is a philosophy of liberation that seeks to give voice to those who resist capitalist dehumanization in its myriad forms.

The market makes of everything—whether labor, art, or sexual desire—a commodity to be bought and sold, with one unit of value replaceable by any other of equivalent value. Just as each product of labor is mutually exchangeable, every *person* is as well—so long as each embodies an equivalent amount of economic value (herein lies the basis of the bourgeois illusion that we are all equal agents, despite the inequities of modern society). But as all of us know all too well, many of our relations are based on an entirely different structure—especially between parents and children. No matter how strained or patriarchal it may be at times, this relation is not based on an exchange of products or activities of equal (abstract) economic value. One of the mysteries of capitalism is that workers freely agree to sell their labor power to the

capitalists, even though only one side (the capitalist) benefits. Marx spent twenty years trying to figure out why. But no person within a family would willingly consent to being treated as just another commodity by another member of the same family. As Virginia Held has argued, although individuals of any gender or sexual orientation may participate in mothering a child, and an individual may mother many children, no child and no mothering person relates to each other as merely replaceable commodities.

Capitalism treats all human relations as potentially replaceable commodities. So what does it do when it comes across human relations that resist its "process of suction" (to borrow a phrase from Marx)? It simply casts them to the side, and even seeks to destroy them. Such is what we are seeing in this world today.

But there is a way out. We are already in touch with forms of caring, reciprocity, and communalism that have a completely different ontological structure than capital's logic of commodification. They are part of the fabric of our everyday experience. We need not pass over or ignore them for the sake of bowing to capital's drive to augment economic value. The basis of resistance lies in us and around us. What we need is a revolutionary philosophy that captures, emphasizes, and expresses that humanism.

Marx once stated—a comment many "Marxists" seem to go out of their way to avoid mentioning—that the relation between men and women is the "most fundamental" and the "measure" of how free or unfree is any society. Perhaps we should update this by saying that the relation between child and parent is the most fundamental, and any society that tramples on it is condemned, *under penalty of death*, to be uprooted by a thorough-going *revolutionary* transformation. If this is the case, then regardless of where we live, we face the task that Frantz Fanon spelled out in his very last words, just before his death in 1961: "For Europe, for ourselves, and for

humanity, comrades, we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new humanity.”