

# DIGITAL HUMANISM



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A Philosophy for 21st  
Century Digital Society

BY

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# INTRODUCTION

*Digital Humanism* is a contribution to the moral philosophy of digital society. It introduces the approach of Digital Humanism and asks: Why is Humanist philosophy important in the contemporary digital age? How can Humanism help us to critically understand how digital technologies shape society and humanity? What kind of Humanism do we need to make sense of digitalisation in society? This book contributes to the renewal of Humanist philosophy in the digital age.

Our contemporary global digital society is not a good place to live in. Authoritarianism and nationalism are major forces in many parts of the world. Authoritarianism and hatred are constantly circulating their ideologies on the Internet and via social media. Along with them, there is an attack on truth and quality media. We have experienced how false news have influenced election results and dominate everyday politics. There is talk of post-truth politics. Too many people distrust the very ideas of facts, truth, experts and research. They believe that truth is what they find emotionally comforting and ideologically acceptable. Algorithms create and manage attention and visibility on the Internet that shape politics. In algorithmic

politics, it has become intransparent if a certain piece of information that circulates online has been created by a human being or a robot. Robots and Artificial Intelligence (AI) shape and influence the worlds of work, consumption, leisure, decision-making, transportation, manufacturing, healthcare, education, news and entertainment. Many humans wonder if human autonomy and decision-making can and will be replaced by AI-powered robots. Digital surveillance is ubiquitous. It is used by both governments and capitalist companies as means of control. We have experienced the demise of the public sphere in the digital age. News and information have to be short, superficial and entertaining in order to reach a significant audience. The public sphere is fragmented into micro-publics, filter bubbles and echo chambers so that humans are unable to talk to each other. Right-wing extremists steer hatred online against migrants, refugees, feminists, socialists, liberals, experts and quality media. The public sphere is highly polarised. As a consequence, many humans tend to think of other humans mainly in terms of friends and enemies. Digital technologies also shape warfare. Digital warfare has extended and intensified the destructive capacities of military technologies. Massive amounts of electronic waste and the powering of digital technologies by fossil fuel-based energy and nuclear energy has contributed to the environmental crisis and environmental risks. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the vulnerability of humanity to viruses and health crises. In the pandemic, humans were forced to re-organise their lives online in order to survive, which created new inequalities and problems.

Humanity and society are in a major crisis. Digitalisation mediates the crisis of humanity and society. How will society look in 10, 20 and 50 years from now? Will society and humanity still exist? Or will they have come to an end? Will society have been destroyed by wars, environmental disasters

and escalating crises? Will new fascisms have emerged that enslave humanity? Will we live in barbarity where the rich rule humanity and kill and treat others at will? Or will an alternative social order that guarantees peace, wealth, happiness, justice, freedom, equality and sustainability for all have emerged? We do not know the answer to these questions, yet it is important that we think about what has brought humanity into the situation it is in now and what ways there are out of the crisis of humanity.

Capitalism is based on an antagonism between individual freedom and social justice. The Enlightenment and the French Revolution advanced the idea of human rights, which include political rights and the right of individuals to own as much property and capital as they can accumulate. Capitalist ownership replaced feudal lordship. Newly established freedoms also established new forms of domination such as wage-labour and capitalist monopolies. The individual freedom of ownership undermines the Enlightenment's promise to realise equality and solidarity as universal rights. Capitalist society undermines social freedom. Capitalist society is based on what the critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Adorno term the dialectic of Enlightenment. Capitalism entails the tendency of the 'self-destruction of enlightenment' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xvi) so that there is the potential for 'the reversion of enlightened civilization to barbarism' (xix).

Capitalism's 'dialectics of enlightenment' can reach 'the point where this dialectics terminates in the abolition of reason' (Adorno 1973/2004, 385) and results in 'outbursts of the irrational' (Adorno 2006, 15), and 'a destruction of rational thought, so that what is left at the end of this process lends itself all too readily to irrationalism and counter-Enlightenment' (Adorno 2019, 121).

Capitalism has the potential to produce Auschwitz. Auschwitz shows that the ‘antireason of totalitarian capitalism [...] tends toward the extermination of humanity’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 43). Capitalism promises to advance Humanism but at the same time has destructive and fascist potentials. Given that capitalism promises Humanism that it actually often subverts, we should not discard Humanism, modernity and universalism – as Postmodernists have done – but argue and struggle for overcoming their particularistic character and for universalising Humanism, modernity and universalism so that everyone benefits. Adorno writes in this context that the dialectic of Enlightenment does not imply the need to abolish the Enlightenment, but rather to fully realise it: ‘the wounds which enlightenment has left behind’ are ‘the moments where enlightenment itself betrays its own imperfect character and reveals that it is actually not yet enlightened enough. And it is only by pursuing the principle of enlightenment through to the end that these wounds may perhaps be healed’ (Adorno 2017, 188).

Capitalist production is not simply an economic model, it is a political economy. This means that class struggles, laws and policies shape the capitalist economy’s specific character and the distribution of power in it. How much (in)equality and social (in)justice exists is a political economy question.

In the 1970s, the model of neoliberal capitalism emerged that became a global political economy. It is based on an empowerment of property owners, capital, finance capital, transnational corporations vis-à-vis workers, the poor, the unemployed and trade unions. Some of its features include the privatisation and commodification of public services and common goods, transnational corporations’ global outsourcing of labour, the formation of precarious labour, the creation of digital capital, the financialisation of the economy, high-risk financial derivatives

and low taxes for corporations and the rich. Neoliberalism is accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003):

*Accumulation by dispossession became increasingly more salient after 1973, in part as compensation for the chronic problems of overaccumulation arising within expanded reproduction. The primary vehicle for this development was financialization [...] But the opening up of new territories to capitalist development and to capitalistic forms of market behaviour also played a role, as did the primitive accumulations accomplished in those countries (such as South Korea, Taiwan, and now, even more dramatically, China) that sought to insert themselves into global capitalism as active players. For all of this to occur required not only financialization and freer trade, but a radically different approach to how state power, always a major player in accumulation by dispossession, should be deployed. The rise of neo-liberal theory and its associated politics of privatization symbolized much of what this shift was about.*

(Harvey 2003, 156)

Neoliberalism exacerbated socio-economic inequalities so that the rich and corporations controlled a larger and increasing share of global wealth and workers and others a smaller and shrinking share. In neoliberalism, the antagonism between individual private capital and social justice reached new heights. Precarious life, precarious labour and the unequal distribution of wealth significantly increased (Piketty 2014). Capital colonised ever larger parts and realms of life. Capitalist profit interests were put over human interests and

human beings. The antagonisms between capital and labour, austerity and precarity, profits and humans deepened.

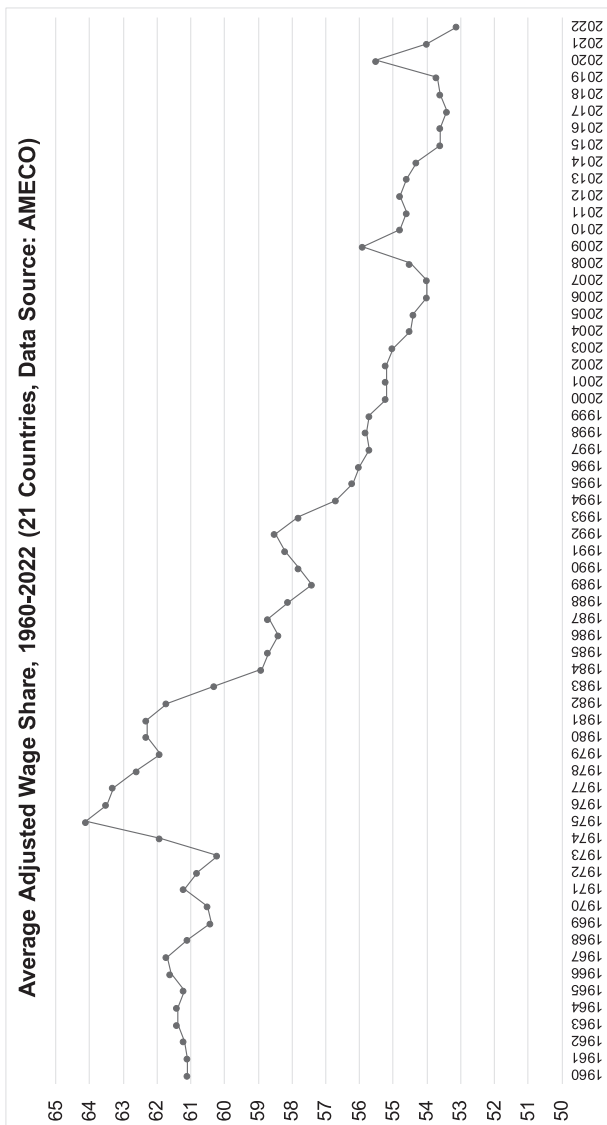
Fig. 1.1 shows the development of the average adjusted wage share for 21 countries. The wage share is the share of total wages in the gross domestic product. I used the data for all countries for which data were available. The wage share shows the economic power of labour vis-à-vis capital. A higher wage share means that the share of capital in the GDP is lower and vice versa. The wage share was available for these countries on an annual basis. I calculated the average of all countries for each year.

Between 1960 and the middle of the 1970s, the wage share was rising, which reflects the importance of welfare states, union power, and the role of working-class struggles. In 1975, the average wage share reached a height of 64.1%. The subsequent rise of neoliberalism brought wage-repression and the redistribution of income from labour to capital with it. In the year 2000, the average wage share dropped to 55.2%. In 2022, it stood with 53.1% at the lowest level in the analysis period that covers 62 years. ‘The labour income share has displayed a downward trend in many economies, both developed and developing, since the 1980s, with a corresponding rise in the profit share. The proximate cause has been wage repression, due to the weakening of labour market institutions, which has prevented wages from keeping pace with increases in productivity and, in many cases, the cost of living’ (UNCTAD 2020, 65).

Table 1.1 shows data for the development of the wage share at the global level and at various regional and organisational levels. In the time period covered, the wage share either stayed very low (Africa, Latin America) or it further dropped. At the world level, it dropped from 53.7% in 2004 to 51.4% in 2017.

Capitalism is crisis-ridden. In 2008, the antagonisms of neoliberal capitalism exploded into a new world economic





**Fig. 1.1. The Development of the Average Adjusted Wage Share in 21 Countries. Countries: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, USA.**

**Table 1.1. Global and Regional Data for the Development of the Wage Share as Percent of GDP, Data Source: International Labour Organisation.**

	World	Africa	Latin America and Caribbean	North America	Asia and the Pacific	Europe and Central Asia	EU28	G20	ASEAN	BRICS
2004	53.7	47.1	48.4	61.7	50.5	56.7	59.4	55.6	41.9	53.2
2005	53	46.4	48.3	60.7	50.1	56.2	59.2	54.8	41.8	52.2
2006	52.5	46.2	48.2	60.6	49.4	55.8	58.8	54.3	41.8	51.3
2007	52.3	45.7	47.6	60.9	48.8	55.9	58.9	54	41.8	50.7
2008	52.6	45.2	48.2	61.1	50	56.3	59.1	54.4	42.9	52.2
2009	53.5	46.1	50.4	60.5	50.5	58.2	60.4	55.2	43.4	53.5
2010	52.2	45.7	49	59.4	49.1	57	59.8	53.9	42	51.8
2011	51.5	46.7	49.3	59.2	49	55.2	58.8	53.1	41.8	50.6
2012	51.5	46.6	49.8	59.3	49	55.3	58.9	53.1	41.5	50.7
2013	51.5	47.2	50.5	58.8	49.1	55.3	58.5	53.1	41.5	51.5
2014	51.7	47.5	50.8	58.7	49.4	55.3	58.4	53.2	41.2	51.9
2015	51.8	47.9	51.1	59.3	49.3	54.8	57.8	53.3	40.6	52
2016	51.7	47.5	51	59.2	49.2	55	57.9	53.3	40.5	51.9
2017	51.4	47.4	50.5	58.8	49	54.6	57.6	52.9	40.1	51.6

crisis. The predominant reaction of politics was not a U-turn but more of the same, an intensification of neoliberalism that became known as austerity politics. Capital was made fit again at the expense of workers and human interests. Neoliberalism weakened the organised labour movement and its capacity to engage in class struggles. The Left was weakened by constant anti-socialist attacks. More and more humans had enough. They were searching for alternatives. Right-wing authoritarian forces were mobilised by steering resentments against minorities and using the friend/enemy ideology. Trump, Brexit and the rise of right-wing authoritarian forces that threaten democracy were the consequence. Neoliberalism's negative dialectic exploded into the rise of new nationalisms, right-wing authoritarianism, racism and new fascisms that distract attention of the working class from the actual capitalist causes of social misery.

Whereas in capitalism, in general, capital dominates over humans, an antagonism which was intensified in neoliberal capitalism, a new form of authoritarian capitalism, has emerged where digital capital dominates over humans and human interests. Digital capital, as organised in the form of the hardware of the software industry, big data, social media, targeted advertising, cloud computing, the Internet of Things, algorithms, surveillance systems and more, now dominates daily life. This has given rise to an increase in nationalistic, racist and fascist collectives, authoritarian structures, polarised and fragmented publics; as well as structures of distrust into experts, science, education and quality news. The reality of neoliberal capitalism has resulted in threats to democracy and the rise of new forms of anti-Humanism. Today, society is at a crossroads between Humanism and barbarism. Only if a broad coalition of progressive forces opposed to fascism and destruction unites and creates a front that struggles for Humanism, can the descent into barbarism be circumvented.

Humanism is an important practical force for saving humanity today from descent into barbarism.

This book is a contribution to the moral philosophy of digital society. It asks: How can Humanism help us to critically understand how digital technologies shape society and humanity?

For providing an answer to this overarching question, the book introduces the approach of Digital Humanism. It provides a general introduction to Digital Humanism and advocates a particular version of Digital Humanism that I call Radical Digital Humanism. *Digital Humanism* provides an introduction to Humanism in the digital age. It analyses what decolonisation of academia and the study of the digital, media and communication means; what the roles are of robots, automation and AI in digital capitalism; and how the communication of death and dying has been mediated by digital technologies, capitalist necropower and digital capitalism. Organised in the form of six chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion, the main question is subdivided into further questions this book deals with:

- Chapter 2: What is Humanism?
- Chapter 3: What is Digital Humanism?
- Chapter 4: What does it mean to decolonise academia and the study of media, communication and the digital? How can academia be transformed in progressive ways?
- Chapter 5: How can we understand and theorise the impacts of robots and AI on everyday life based on Radical Humanism?
- Chapter 6: How do the AI strategies of the EU, the United States under Donald Trump and China look like?
- Chapter 7: What is the role of the communication of death and dying in capitalist society? How has communication

with dying loved ones changed in the COVID-19 pandemic? What roles have digital technologies and capitalism played in this context?

Chapter 2's title is 'What is Humanism?'. The chapter discusses definitions of Humanism. It synthesises such definitions in order to provide a philosophical understanding of Humanism. This understanding has epistemological, ontological and axiological dimensions. The chapter points out that Humanism is transcultural. Common objections to Humanism are discussed by engaging with the works of the historian Yuval Noah Harari. Based on the general understanding of Humanism, the approach of Radical Humanism is introduced. Radical Humanism is a particular form of Humanism. Its epistemological, ontological and axiological aspects are outlined. The chapter discusses four examples approaches of Radical Humanism (Karl Marx, Erich Fromm, Wang Ruoshui, David Harvey).

Chapter 3's title is 'What is Digital Humanism?'. It deals with the question: What is Digital Humanism? It argues that Digital Humanism is a philosophy suited for the analysis of the digital age that has specific epistemological, ontological and axiological dimensions. It also introduces a specific version of Digital Humanism, namely Radical Digital Humanism. It argues that we need to advance the co-operation of all Humanisms in order circumvent the rise of new fascisms in the digital age. The chapter also discusses and responds to objections to Digital Humanism.

Chapter 4's title is 'Decolonising Academia: A Radical Humanist Perspective'. It reflects on calls for and processes of the decolonisation of the academic field of Media and Communication Studies. It asks: What does it mean to decolonise academia and the study of media, communication and the digital? How can academia be transformed in

progressive ways? The chapter takes a Radical Humanist and Political Economy perspective on decolonisation, which means that it is interested in how capitalism, power and material aspects of academia such as resources, money, infrastructures, time, space, working conditions and social relations of production shape the possibilities and realities of research and teaching. Chapter 4 stresses the importance of defining (neo-)colonialism as foundation of debates about decolonisation and engages with theoretical foundations and definitions of (neo-)colonisation. It identifies how material forces and political economy shape and negatively impede on the university and academic knowledge production. The chapter provides perspectives for concrete steps that can and should be taken for overcoming the capitalist and colonised university and creating the public interest and commons-oriented university and academic system.

Chapter 5's title is 'Robots and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Digital Capitalism'. The chapter asks: How can we understand and theorise the impacts of robots and AI on everyday life based on Radical Humanism? How can Lefebvre's ideas be used to reveal the ideological character of contemporary accounts of the impacts of robots and AI on society? It engages with rather unknown works of the Radical Humanist Henri Lefebvre on the sociology and philosophy of technology such as *Vers le cybernanthrope (Towards the Cybernanthrope)*. Foundations of a Lefebvrian, dialectical, Radical Humanist approach to the sociology and philosophy of technology are presented. The chapter introduces Lefebvre's notion of the cybernanthrope and sets it in relation to robots and AI in contemporary society. Based on Lefebvre's critique of the cybernanthrope, Chapter 5 develops foundations of the ideology critique of robots and AI in digital capitalism. It discusses examples of technological deterministic and social constructivist thought in the context of robotics, AI and cyborgs

and argues for an alternative, Lefebvrian, dialectical approach. The chapter situates Humanism in the context of computing, AI and robotics. In Chapter 5, a Lefebvrian Radical Humanism is advanced by engaging in analyses of AI and robots in Post-humanism, Transhumanism, techno-deterministic approaches, social construction of technology approaches, techno-optimism, techno-pessimism, accelerationism, the mass unemployment hypothesis and Spike Jonze's movie *Her*. The chapter shows that the major lesson we can learn from the Radical Humanist sociology of technology and Henri Lefebvre's works on technology is that Radical Humanism helps creating and sustaining technologies for the many, not the few. This insight remains of high relevance in the age of digital capitalism, smart robots and AI.

Chapter 6's title is 'Policy Discourses on Robots and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the EU, the United States, and China'. The chapter asks: How do the AI strategies of the EU, the United States under Donald Trump and China look like? It conducts a critical policy discourse analysis from a Radical Humanist Perspective. It analyses what kind of ideologies we can find in the AI strategies of the European Union, the United States under Donald Trump and China. The analysis shows that AI and robotics are situated in a digital technology race that is indicative of an international political-economic race for the accumulation of political economic power.

Chapter 7's title is 'Necropower, Death and Digital Communication in COVID-19 Capitalism'. 'The Communication of Death and Dying in Capitalist Society'. The chapter asks: What is the role of the communication of death and dying in capitalist society? How has communication with dying loved ones changed in the COVID-19 pandemic? What roles have digital technologies and capitalism played in this context?

The chapter is a reflection on the digital mediation of death and dying in the COVID-19 pandemic from a Radical

Humanist critical political economy perspective. It analyses death and dying in capitalism, discusses some foundational theoretical insights into the role of death and dying in capitalism, presents empirical studies of death and dying in society, gives a theoretical interpretation of these empirical insights, presents some empirical studies of death and dying in society and the COVID-19 pandemic and interprets their findings from a Communication Studies perspective.

In capitalist societies, death and dying are taboo topics and are hidden, invisible and institutionalised. The COVID-19 pandemic had contradictory effects on the role of death in society. It is a human, cultural and societal universal that humans want to die in company with loved ones. The presented empirical studies confirm the insights of the philosophers Kwasi Wiredu and Jürgen Habermas that humans are fundamentally social and communicative beings from the cradle to the grave. The wish to die in a social manner derives from humans' social and communicative nature. In capitalism, the reality of dying diverges from the ideal of dying. Capitalism hides, individualises, makes invisible, and institutionalises death and dying.

Building and going beyond the works of the political theorist and philosopher Achille Mbembe and the philosopher and sociologist Erich Fromm, the chapter introduces the notion of capitalist necropower. It is shown how the COVID-19 pandemic in many cases destroyed the social and communicative nature of human beings and how capitalist necropower created unnecessary surplus-deaths and formed the context of the digital mediation of communication with dying loved ones in the pandemic.

Chapter 8 is the book's conclusion. It draws together the overall arguments, argues for a radical humanism and digital humanism, and provides suggestions of how to advance these approaches in society.