SOCIETYNOW

DIGITAL HUMANISM

A Philosophy for 21st Century Digital Society

Christian Fuchs

DIGITAL HUMANISM

Digital Humanism is the book we have been waiting for. Techno gurus, post-humanists, environmentalists, post-colonialists and post-structuralists will have you believe that humanist ethics is no longer relevant to the contemporary world. Yet, as this book demonstrates unflinchingly, never before has humanism been so relevant to the contemporary period. Humanism offers a philosophical and ethical reflection on the recklessness and havoc wrought by human choices and constitutes an attempt to formulate the conditions for a hospitable social world. *Digital Humanism* refuses to transform humans into machines and to think of machines as humans. This is why this book is such an important and timely intervention.

– *Eva Illouz, Directrice d'Etudes, École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), France*

DIGITAL HUMANISM

A Philosophy for 21st Century Digital Society

BY

CHRISTIAN FUCHS

Paderborn University, Germany

emerald PUBLISHING

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2022

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80382-422-2 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-80382-419-2 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-80382-421-5 (Epub)

ISOQAR certified Management System, awarded to Emerald for adherence to Environmental standard ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

This page intentionally left blank

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

This page intentionally left blank

1

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

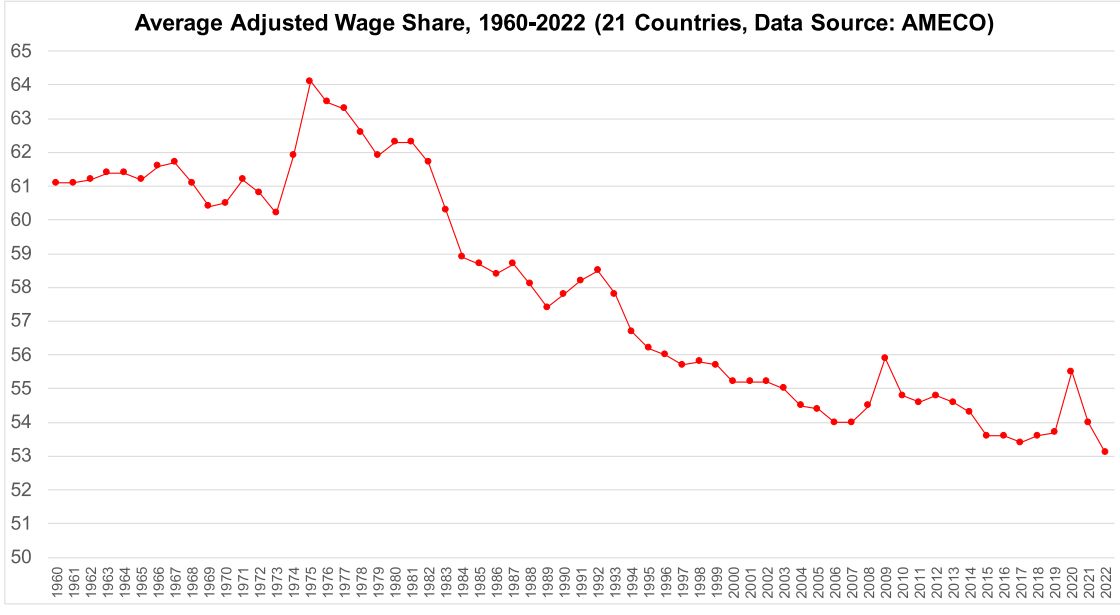

Fig. 1.1. The Development of the Average Adjusted Wage Share in 21 Countries. Countries: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, USA.

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