Nothing to Lose but Our (Digital) Chains!

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Digital Humanism: A Philosophy for the 21ˢᵗ Century
Christian Fuchs
Emerald Publishing
308 pp.

D*igital Humanism: A Philosophy for the 21ˢᵗ Century,* Christian Fuchs's latest book, is a collection of essays that are linked, broadly, through examining different aspects of the digital humanities and humanity's becoming digital. The best essays in the book cover how transhumanist values, the powers of artificial intelligence software, and the isolation of our hyperconnected online world contribute in their own ways to the growing indignity of human life under digital capitalism. This is the vector that produces his best work. The ideas in some of these essays have the potential to become a strong voice and necessary perspective for a socialist confrontation with the slow-rolling catastrophe of our time. This post-colonial socialism of the anthropocene is too small a voice in our culture to match the challenges before us. We need more, and more powerful voices advocating for a better society that overcomes what faces us, instead of our brutal world that he clearly describes.

When Humanism is a Socialism, What is the Digital?

I chose this book to review because I thought his previous book, *Communicating COVID-19,* was very good, with great ideas and analyses that lay a foundation for an impressive future work on what the pandemic has done to societies and individuals across the globe. Its focal essay brilliantly described the shrunken claustrophobia of our social spaces during the height of the COVID pandemic. The physical and environmental boundaries of our individual social worlds contracted with shocking speed. That contraction produced a fear intense enough to sharpen into aggressive paranoia as the complexity of our social exchanges flattened into a broad field of cackling aggression and shared panic. Constituting that field are all the individual connections of internet culture.

Digital Humanism describes itself, in its subtitle, as *A Philosophy for 21st Century Digital Society.* Expecting a follow-up that built on the first book, I thought this would step forward from that remarkable analysis. *Digital Humanism* lays further foundation for a fascinating vector of future research: a socialist critique of our digital civilization that envisions an alternative digitality in which we dedicate ourselves to common good. It creates a problem for me as a reviewer. Most frequently, in academe, reviewers engage with a new work looking for flaws and shortcomings. I have fallen into this mean-spirited habit at times in my own contributions to research communities. But my reaction to Fuchs's work is straightforward agreement. He so very clearly states facts that I long ago concluded from my own experience, networking, and overall knowledge of capitalist systems and values running the academy and business. None of what he says is news to me. This fuels my impatience with this book in a way in which, as a student of the works of Marx, I'm sure Fuchs can get on board. Surely, we can move past recognizing these facts and begin to do something about them![1]

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[1] Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach,* No. 11.

My only real critique is about how we conceive of these truths, and the solutions to those problems. I worry that if loyalty to humanism is the lens through which you conceive of a truly post-capitalist society, then you will deprioritize solutions that shrink away from that concept, but are necessary to save ourselves. I am thinking of political and ethical principles drawn from, in particular, ecological scientific practice and thinking, the revival of North American and Australasian Indigenous philosophies, and the ontological ideas that chaotic and dynamic relationships imply. Where I criticize Fuchs's work and position, it will be from that place of wider influence. One question that can develop his own position is, perhaps, to wonder if his humanism can emerge from a cosmopolitical or ecopolitical framework.

Anti-Colonial Definitions of New Socialisms

Fuchs's writing is stark and direct. He begins the book with an essay on the nature of his humanism that defines it directly. His conception of socialist humanism is a comprehensive framework of thinking that orients the foundational elements of a personality and a culture. It conceives of human knowledge as the capability to use reason to understand how the world works, an epistemology which includes the use and development of science. It sets itself in a framework of understanding reality that relies on no presumptions of transcendent authorities or ultimate natures. Its atheism is indifferent to God, religion, ideology or other authorities whose claims over human behaviour rest beyond a voluntary human legitimacy. Humans constitute society and its various forms, practices and systems through their activities, social relations and social connections. The ground of our institutions' legitimacy is our trust in them.

The political, or axiological in the terminology Fuchs chooses, is where the humanistic character of Fuchs's philosophy shines brightest. Humanist values guide political action to improve humanity's living conditions. Such a fully humane society is only possible when we manage all production and wealth as a commons to which everyone has access according to their needs. Although he expresses this socialism in a fairly orthodox way, it is refreshing in an era of such aggressive authoritarianism to engage with an understanding of society in which we are best when our discussions and public square harmonizes around critical inquiry and action in free relationships among sincerely humane people.

The first several essays in *Digital Humanism* express this vision, but I was left wanting a deeper engagement into the details of Fuchs's own vision. Instead, much of his effort expressing his ideas is spent defending his ideas from other progressive perspectives. He engages academic orthodoxies of post-colonial studies, which have correctly identified many presumptions in Western Humanist ideologies that justified the subjugation and denigration of those peoples who stood in empire's way. His method is fertile: using post-colonial philosophies to identify how all human societies express common virtues of humaneness in contexts and vectors appropriate to their historical and cultural conditions.

A Danger of Self-Destruction in Post-Colonialism

Fuchs's defence of humanism against charges of Eurocentrism reveals key elements of a problem that progressive post-colonial perspectives can fall into. It is a presumption that ideas and philosophies of Western origin are inherently and inescapably Eurocentric. Most professional researchers and thinkers in the humanities and social sciences avoid at least the strongest versions of this interpretation. The confusion occurs most often in popular activist spaces, where their more extremely online discourse lays a path laden with straw, but popularly influential.

The fact that Fuchs considers it necessary to defend his humanism against charges that humanism is inherently Eurocentric reveals that such a charge is reasonable in our professional communities. Beyond, it has become a feature of authoritarian propaganda whose purpose is to degrade support among the Western left for democratic movements in Asia and Africa. A key political framework of humanism is liberal democracy. If humanism, as a Western cultural and philosophical development, is inescapably Eurocentric, then democratic governance and attitudes would be inherently illegitimate for any culture beyond the West. Fuchs's counter-argument is to express the humanistic principles that recur across, if I may paraphrase, <u>multiple poles</u> of the human world: traditional Bantu philosophy, the unique humanism of Latin America, and the philosophies of Chinese Buddhism. His treatment is relatively cursory, which is perhaps inevitable, given the potential scale of such an inquiry. It is enough for his argument to state the facts, suitably referenced, and continue his defence of humanism and its democracy on its own terms.

A strength of Fuchs's defence of humanism is that it is simultaneously a critique. He uncovers humanist approaches in these more global traditions because he recognizes that leaning on the Western tradition of humanism alone is problematic. The humanism that emerged from Western Europe, whose easy shorthand is liberal humanism, is inherently hypocritical because of how deeply the philosophy's development was bound up in capitalism and colonialism. Liberal humanism's colonial presumptions were best expressed in the works and speeches of John Stuart Mill, a paradigm thinker of Western humanism. Mill argued that Western culture's having developed liberal humanism demonstrated its superiority over other cultures, and mandated Western powers with a political responsibility to educate subject peoples accordingly. He considered his longtime employer, the British East India Company, as a force for "progress that spread liberal values and improved mankind's capacity for individuality and the enjoyment of higher pleasures."[2] On developing any reasonable understanding of the British Empire's history, one rightly understands this as a post-facto justification of centuries of barbaric violence and conquest.

Beyond this, Fuchs identifies an ethical core of capitalist thinking in a central tenet of Western Humanism: that the ground of freedom is the power of an individual to create and honour contracts. The capitalist conception of freedom reduces all the diverse

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[2] Tunick, "Tolerant Imperialism," 1.

responsibilities of human social life to commercial obligations between individuals.[3] This individualism is the philosophical starting point of contemporary popular libertarianism, liberalism purified to its most brutal rejection of social and moral obligation. His analysis on this matter is promising, since decolonizing the heritage of humanism can craft a meaning for the West's humanist tradition that escapes its capitalist and imperialist shadows.

How to Decolonize Our Universities

The first steps in Fuchs's outline for how to decolonize the Western academy and the now-global Western model of university culture depends on a concept called pluriversality. He describes this concept with the influence of other researchers such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Winston Mano, viola c. milton, Arturo Escobar, and Amaya Querejazu.[4] Pluriversality is a post-colonial understanding of universality that avoids the absolutism of colonial approaches or the relativism that takes all dialogue among cultural traditions as a battle for domination.[5] Pluriversality instead reconceives the concept of universality as a subject matter: that which has universal significance will change its content across philosophical orders and traditions, but the questions and lines of inquiry are common to all human traditions. Systems of morality and their principles, for example, will vary across societies and cultural lifeways, but the human need for moralities and moral principles is common to all our societies and cultures.

A post-colonial philosophy, therefore, does not reject everything that comes from the West, as the presumption of Eurocentrism does. Dismissing all Western ideas an inherently Eurocentric is, in a way, to trap yourself in colonial thinking: you become a colonial thinker who rejects everything bound up within the colonizer. You remain in a reactive mode of thinking, rather than a creative approach that thoroughly learns from and moves beyond the polar opposition of colonizer and colonized. Pluriverse thinking provides a framework for how a Western thinker, whose intellectual influences and methods express Western traditions, can use those ideas in a relationship of equal dignity with any other philosophical tradition.

Thinking along with pluriversal frameworks resolves the internal contradiction of humanism as a tradition that emboldens free thought and democratic social norms, while developing in an economic and political context of imperialistic exploitation. Collaborators in developing knowledge learn from each other, without one philosophical tradition or its representatives in key texts becoming authoritative. Many other thinkers and currents in philosophical

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[3] Fuchs, *Digital Humanism*, 28-29.

[4] Fuchs, *Digital Humanism,* 68-71.

[5] Fuchs, *Digital Humanism,* 182. Fuchs mounts an interesting argument against cultural relativism, but for all its insight, it remains unclear what cultural relativism Fuchs is combatting? The variation of cultures doesn't imply that there are no human universals, nor that cultures have a rigid essence putting them beyond reason itself (ex. "Some cultures are incompatible with democracy"). The former accepts the validity of fascism and the politics of violence, presuming that without universal evaluative standards of good and bad for people, everything is permitted. The latter confuses the ability to think and reason with the rigidly simplistic rationality of the colonizing West, sticking with that very presumed confusion that legitimated conquest.

discourses beyond the strictly-defined sub-discipline of post-colonial studies are arriving at this point by their own paths. One current of my own research in the confluence of pragmatism and critical theory would make an excellent Western-origin partner to Fuchs's post-colonial influences.

We can understand discourse and other public conversations to resolve social crises as political revolutions that change our value systems. We confront the problems that our institutions have created by digging into the presuppositions and presumptions that inspire their order and system, understand how they interact in that system to create institutions that degrade and destroy what they were supposed to protect and nurture.[6] Applying these methods Rahel Jaeggi developed, of philosophical critique of institutions and their underlying moralities, we can understand what in the neoliberal university system is destroying the traditions of knowledge and the means of its production.

The critical methods that Fuchs pulls from post-colonial thinking can push this creative destruction of the Western and Westernized academic system to understand the paradoxes and destructive contradictions in modern global capitalism overall. "For the classical thinkers of imperialism, imperialism meant the combination of finance capital, the monopolization of capital, capital export and the military competition for spheres and territories of influence and accumulation."[7] Where we see the university system and academic culture buttressing and reinforcing values and professional habits that encourage and legitimize monopolization, financialization of material assets, and a global politics of unending military competition, that is where our critiques must begin. Such critical thought will produce the justifications for action that attacks these institutions' legitimacy and the new moralities and ways of thinking that overcomes this will to conquer and monopolize.

These anti-imperialist principles and critical methods can be the foundation of a powerful work that pushes back against fascistic ways of thinking and persuasion on both right and left. The anti-rightist dimension of such work is, I think, obvious. But the anti-left dimension is necessary too: the conception of anti-imperialism on which Fuchs draws is immune to the ways anti-imperialism more broadly has been corrupted into support for returning to a world order of Great Game warring empires. Spurred by anti-Americanism in the wake of the Iraq War and the related growth of mass surveillance state security services, influential left-wing media promotes Russian and Chinese military expansionism as a path to global social progress.[8] The tradition to which Fuchs returns rebukes this duplicitous argument: the 'multipolar world' is itself a politics of unending global military competitions of regional great powers for access to resources and infrastructure for capitalist production to fuel that very military machine.

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[6] Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life,* 225-229.

[7] Fuchs, *Digital Humanism,* 80.

[8] Ross, "The Multipolar Spin."

How Far Does He Go to Decolonize Digital Humanism?

Not far enough yet, for my tastes, expectations, and desires. But I can at least see the direction in which Fuchs is moving, and I endorse this entirely. The essay from which the book takes its title is a promising starting point, but needs much more philosophical work before it lives up to all that the title suggests. Fuchs initially sets digital humanism as an oppositional critique of the currently popular research trend of digital humanities. This is the re-orientation of humanities research (and the vector along which many research grants are awarded) along algorithmic analyses of massive datasets of digitized cultural production archives. Digital humanities itself therefore departs quite sharply from the traditional methods of humanities research, qualitative analysis and deep critical reading. Software-first approaches to humanities research inevitably produce superficial results when database analysis is the only purpose of the research, and not a starting tool in a larger, more complex inquiry.

Fuchs gives several reasons why reorientation around algorithmic software is far from the best way to do research in humanities disciplines, each of which remixes his framework principles of socialist humanism for a digital focus. The digital-critical refocus of his humanist epistemology: computers and software have no reason, self-consciousness, or critical thinking abilities, so these tools have no capacity to inquire about the nature of the world. Algorithmic software can only reflect the patterns and tendencies within the data on which they were trained, so are incapable of judging injustice in the world, only assessing likelihoods from whatever the current order of the world may be. Critical thinking, as the humanities has developed such techniques, identifies the inherent flaws and potential solutions for algorithms' blindnesses to alternative ways of life.

Massimo Airoldi gives an example of how algorithms reproduce real-world injustices, describing an attempt by Amazon to use algorithmic analysis to improve equity and overall candidate quality in its hiring, since for much of its history, women and ethnic minority applicants were passed over for white men of lesser skill and potential because of implicit bias in their company culture. However, because the HR algorithms were trained on datasets of Amazon's own biased hiring records, the software accepted the intuitively (to a human) unfair biases as real guiding principles. Algorithms, trained on problematic practices and information, reproduce the very unfairnesses and problems their application was supposed to solve.[9]

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[9] Airoldi, *Machine Habitus,* 43-45. Some anecdotal contributions on my part. As of my writing this, the AI chatbot ChatGPT has become trendily popular, with many people playing a variety of call-response or storytelling games with it. A curious post in my Mastodon feed complained that ChatGPT refused to translate a story it had composed into African-American vernacular dialect, on grounds that even using the dialect is racist. The poster, who was black, was mystified. However, considering how algorithms are typically developed, it is quite likely that ChatGPT's training datasets included many white people using the dialect to make racist jokes. The algorithm's overcorrection was to presume that any attempt to have it speak in African-American dialects has unethical motives, so blocks its use pre-emptively. I'm not sure whether or not this is progress.

Algorithm designers need the humanities far more than algorithms can improve humanities research, despite the value of quick keyword searches across hundreds of years of archives. Computers and algorithmic database search are useful tools for some aspects of humanities research, and Fuchs is correct to deride the trend that focusses on such software as the only means of new research. These tools have natural limits, as the digital-critical remix of his humanist ontology stakes those limits: software cannot be autonomous or social, and so cannot be reasonable guides for the actions of humans because we are autonomous, socially embedded agents. This guides Fuchs's political expression of humanism, that computer technology and its uses must always be subordinated to human good in ways that encourage our social tendencies and liberation.

What Can a Thorough Digital Humanism Do in a Pandemic?

The biggest challenge that the COVID pandemic has given social epistemologists, and anyone in any discipline or profession that studies the spread of ideologies and beliefs, is figuring out who is a trustworthy guide to the best action. Fuchs's essay in *Digital Humanism* about the ideologies that have driven public and government action on COVID sticks to a perspective with which I largely agree: capitalist ideologies prioritizing individualistic conceptions of freedom and social priorities of economic growth and profiteering cause humanitarian disasters. Fuchs centres his argument on how capitalist ideology makes death invisible and suffering unimportant. "The incommunicability of death is part of death's big capitalist disappearing act."[10]

Capitalist values prioritize the freedom of the individual, and conceives the priorities of the individual as self-interest, a personal and personalized good. Obligations to other people or responsibilities to a community are at best secondary to priorities of self-interest: I stick to the terms of a contract I benefit from its obligations and can secure the other's trust. This attitude devalues and at worst dismisses the lives of those from which the individual can gain nothing: the foreign, the poor, the people of the future are some obvious examples. If the highest value priority is the individual's present satisfaction, then the engine of the highest ethical good becomes the death drive. One shortcoming of *Digital Humanism* as a book is that Fuchs doesn't probe deeper into this inherent self-destruction of any capitalist production process.

Although Freud himself could not understand the logic of what he called the death drive, its psychology becomes more clear in its political expression. Human death drive emerges from the intense pleasure of exhilaration through maximal consumption. The intensity of production required to fuel such consumption is the fleeting prosperity of capitalism's overabundance among our global society's more privileged populations. The appearance of abundance in a person's everyday life, such as the average middle or upper class household earner through the late 20th century, is the experiential foundation of their everyday intuitions that buttressed an unjust and unsustainable economic system with stereotypical

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[10] Fuchs, *Digital Humanism,* 175.

justifications. Fuchs refers to this as the marxist ideological function. I prefer to brand myself differently, but we both perceive what is happening here.

Our revanchist reactions to the COVID pandemic demonstrates the seductive power of the perception of your life as abundance: returning to capitalist production that will satisfy the self-interest of consumption's exhilaration took priority over protecting the vulnerable or preserving the overall public health of our communities. We did so largely with knowledge that more people would die, people vulnerable to infection would be marginalized from social contact, and that many more people would become disabled from post-viral health complications, especially after repeated infections from multiple strains of COVID. The ecstatic joy of gorging ourselves on consumption was more important to us than the death and suffering that would result after the high's electricity fades. Ideologies that centre the joy of overconsumption as humanity's highest good obscure the crushing pain of destruction upon the comedown. This is the psychology of capitalism's overconsumption death drive.

What Do We Get From This Book?

This book is another fertile set of ideas whose expansion into a full research program would be remarkable. Our times call for a new communitarianism, an ethic of resilience as communities and societies of neighbours and friends. Such a philosophy could proliferate as we market and promote our work to other researchers and the general public. Stimulating, provoking, and encouraging people to develop their own personalities and knowledge of right and wrong prioritizing our responsibility to each other and the ecologies that maintain the conditions of human survival. I write this as someone who is, myself, still figuring out what the next phase of my research career will be, on what I want to focus my energies, and how I want to use those energies. Let's get to work on it.

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