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From Alienation to Disposability: Marx's Relevance in the Struggle for Human Dignity

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ABSTRACT: This article revisits Karl Marx's writings through the lens of human suffering and dehumanization, exploring their contemporary relevance for struggles centered on human dignity. By critically engaging with Marx's early works on alienation and his later analyses of the commodity form and machinery in *Capital*, the article highlights how capitalist social relations reduce human life to abstract labor, ultimately rendering it disposable. The article proposes a selective, emancipatory interpretation of Marx that acknowledges long-standing critiques, especially from decolonial and critical race theorists, while maintaining that Marx's methodological focus on emancipation is a potent instrument for examining structural violence. Inspired by the Kurdish slogan *Berxwedan jîyan e* ("Resistance is Life"), which emerged during periods of severe state violence that sought to strip life of its dignity and meaning, the article illustrates how Marx's concepts illuminate the ontological dimensions of resistance to dehumanization. It argues that reclaiming Marx through the question of life provides a vocabulary to confront contemporary forms of disposability and affirm human worth.

KEYWORDS: alienation, dehumanization, disposability, Kurdish resistance, Karl Marx, ontology of resistance

Attributed to the Sufi mystic Mansur Al-Hallaj, the words "Hell is not the place where we suffer, it is the place where no one hears our suffering" serve as a poignant starting point for this article. These words resonate deeply, not only as a reflection on pain, but also on the profound silence imposed on those who suffer. For marginalized and indigenous communities, whose lives are often marked by violence and marginalization, this silence is not only metaphorical; it means their literal expulsion from being considered fully human. In these

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cases, suffering is not simply ignored; it is denied the recognition that would allow it to be heard and acknowledged as human suffering. When entire communities are rendered invisible, not only is their pain silenced, but so also is their humanity. Even when the bodies of these communities are visible on the news, their stories remain unsaid and their pain ungrieved. Al-Hallaj's words capture this existential absence: suffering is compounded not only by its intensity, but also by its failure to be recognized as suffering worthy of recognition.

I have often observed that the Kurds refer to the words of Al-Hallaj when subjected to violence and dehumanization, feeling unheard in their suffering. In their struggle against this dehumanization, however, they developed the slogan *Berxwedan jîyan e* ("Resistance is Life"), powerfully asserting that, despite being ignored or silenced, their fight ensures that their suffering is heard. This slogan replaces the familiar leftist phrase "life is resistance" with an ontological redefinition: resistance is not just an act of defiance, but a necessary condition for a dignified life. It redefines life itself, asserting that life can only be truly lived through resistance. In the 1990s, in the midst of extensive state violence in Turkey, the slogan became central to Kurdish resistance, signifying that resistance was not just a political act, but an existential one. When state violence sought to reduce people to mere biological existence, resistance became the only means of preserving life.

The slogan was first articulated by Mazlum Doğan, a Kurdish political prisoner, in 1982 during his imprisonment in Diyarbakır Military Prison, established to hold Kurdish detainees after the 1980 military coup. His self-immolation on Newroz (Kurdish New Year) symbolized the essence of the slogan: to resist is to affirm life and humanity, to assert the right to live. Doğan's act erased his biological existence to create the Kurdish collective existence on Newroz, a day that Kurds associate with revival. It is rumored that Doğan left behind three matches, symbolizing a call for the Kurdish people to rise up and reclaim their dignity in the face of state violence. These matches resemble Fanon's "torch," which he described in *Black Skin, White Masks* as "already there, waiting for this turn of history"—a metaphor for the spark that erupts when history reaches a breaking point" (Fanon 1986, 134). In this sense, Doğan's act became a symbol of collective resistance, poised to affirm life and reclaim dignity.

Dehumanization, the struggle against which is captured in *Berxwedan jîyan e*, is not simply the silencing or marginalization of certain communities but their expulsion from the very realm of humanity. It is a systemic effort to strip away the recognition of their existence as human beings, effectively silencing their pain and denying their humanity. The denial of humanity

through dehumanization has been a central concern in both historical and political thought, shaping the intellectual frameworks through which we understand resistance and survival. These struggles against dehumanization are explored in two main bodies of work: one that offers critiques of the colonial history of human rights and the other that examines the effects of sovereign power in contemporary political contexts.

The first body of work addresses dehumanization through the colonial critique, which traces its origins to thinkers like Aimé Césaire (1955) and Frantz Fanon (1965, 1986). Their work laid the foundation for a vast body of decolonial critiques that explores how colonial powers constructed certain bodies as nonhuman—beings whose lives could be overlooked, exploited, or eradicated. Césaire and Fanon argue that colonial systems deliberately sought to erase the dignity of oppressed peoples, denying them their humanity in order to justify exploitation. For Fanon (1965), dehumanization arises from colonial violence that strips the colonized of their identities and humanity. This form of dehumanization is critical to understanding the historical and political roots of oppression and marginalization. Additionally, decolonial theorists have made distinguished contributions to the field, emphasizing how the *coloniality of power*, knowledge, and being continues to shape modern power relations, keeping indigenous and racialized communities outside the realm of full humanity (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo 2011; Quijano 2007).

The second body of work on sovereign power explores how sovereign structures systematically dehumanize specific groups. Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2005) discusses the concept of "bare life," describing how modern sovereign power creates conditions where certain populations are rendered expendable, erasing them from both political and moral consideration. Achille Mbembe (2003) extends this idea by examining how sovereign power not only erases lives but also strips away their symbolic significance, even in death, rendering both their existence and their deaths irrelevant to the broader social and political order. Similarly, Judith Butler (2004) analyzes the derealization of life, addressing how certain lives are made politically invisible and excluded from the social fabric. Michel Foucault (2003) highlights how modern state power operates through the logic of "make live, let die," showing how biopolitical control protects some lives while discarding others. This body of work demonstrates how sovereign power works to marginalize and exclude specific groups, perpetuating their dehumanization through laws, policies, and practices that strip them of their rights and recognition. Dehumanization, in this sense, is not only a matter of physical violence but also the symbolic erasure of lives,

showing how control over life itself is intricately tied to the marginalization of certain populations.

In discussions of human life and worth, however, the writings of Karl Marx are often overlooked. Marxism has developed a reputation for insufficiently addressing the struggles of marginalized communities, often prioritizing the proletariat as the central agent of social transformation. Historically, this has led to a focus on universal liberation, while the specific struggles and sufferings of indigenous, racialized, and other marginalized groups have often been sidelined. This critique of Marxism, particularly in its treatment of marginalized communities, remains relevant today as modern struggles for racial justice, indigenous rights, and decolonization continue to highlight the need for more holistic political frameworks. I acknowledge these critiques but argue that Marx's writings still offer valuable insights, particularly in how we understand human life and dignity.

I propose a selective reading of Marx's work that focuses specifically on his insights into human life, human worth, and the processes of dehumanization. By engaging with Marx's writings on alienation, commodity form, and machine-disposability, I aim to explore how his analysis can inform our understanding of modern struggles against dehumanization. This selective reading is not an attempt to absolve Marx of the criticisms he has faced but rather to uncover elements within his work that can contribute to contemporary discussions on human dignity, liberation, and social transformation. In doing so, I aim to offer a nuanced interpretation of Marx's relevance today, one that brings his ideas into dialogue with decolonial thought and today's struggles for justice. This approach offers an opportunity to revitalize Marx's concepts and methods and to contribute meaningfully to contemporary discussions in decolonial and political theory.

At the heart of Marx's work is a method of analysis that places emancipation at its epistemic core. For Marx, emancipation is not merely an abstract end goal; it is the very lens through which social structures—including exploitation, alienation, and the commodification of human life—are examined. What distinguishes Marx's approach is the depth with which he develops and engages with emancipation as a transformative force. This method provides a framework for understanding and challenging systems of oppression. I propose a re-reading of Marx that focuses on his approach to structures through the lens of emancipation. By revisiting Marx's concerns, questions, and methods, we can draw inspiration for new definitions and understandings that can help us address contemporary struggles and challenges, especially in the pursuit of human dignity.

In what follows, I also reflect on Marx's understanding of human life within capitalist relations. First, I revisit his early writings, particularly the *Manuscripts of 1844*, where we find the initial questions Marx raised about human life and its commodification under the capitalist mode of production. By examining these early reflections on capitalist relations, we gain insight into Marx's primary concerns regarding human suffering and the loss of control over one's life in capitalism. I then explore Marx's concept of alienation as a wound to the human soul, a disfigurement of human beings, and the loss of one's place in society.

Secondly, I focus on "The Commodity" chapter of *Capital Volume I*, where Marx carefully unfolds the most given and taken-for-granted concept of modern capitalism, the commodity, and re-builds on it, like a work of crochet. This section provides an analysis of mystification in the capitalist mode of production, which makes it possible to measure and compare immeasurable and incomparable things. This analysis not only opens up a window to look at the comparability of human lives as relations of equivalency, but it is also inspiring in terms of the methodological tools that can be used to disclose the twisted "objectivities" stemming from some specific social relations.

Lastly, I point out Marx's analysis of "the machine" in capitalist modernity. This part of the article mainly elaborates on Marx's discussion of the modern factory system as a determining factor of the tune of social life in bourgeois societies in *Capital Volume I*. How machinery becomes, in the words of Marx, "the form of social existence" in the capitalist mode of production is the central theme that I pursue in this exploration. Related to this, the disposability of the worker's body and the production of the industrial reserve army is discussed as an aspect of the machinery form of social existence.

By reflecting on these critical aspects of Marx's thought, I aim to highlight his continued relevance in understanding the devaluation of human life under capitalism. Marx's theories provide a lens not only for analyzing but also for transforming the structures that render people disposable. Through his method, grounded in the standpoint of emancipation, Marx offers a roadmap for reclaiming human dignity in a world that continually seeks to undermine it.

Alienation: Wounded Souls and Disfigured Bodies

The *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* is one of the first texts in which Marx analyzes the dialectical relationship between capital and labor to understand how modern society works. He mainly focuses on the loss of life for the worker in a society that continuously reproduces a split between human exis-

tence and their work activity. Marx questions "the meaning of the reduction of the greater part of mankind to abstract labor" (Marx 2011, 17). "Abstract labor" is the term Marx uses to underline that labor as concrete human activity loses its specificity and "*labor* occurs only in the form of *wage-earning* activity" (original emphases, 17). He states that in capitalist relations of production, "the worker must sell himself and his human identity" (16). Thus, "the worker suffers in his very existence" (13).

Marx expresses this "suffering in existence" with the following words: "Production does not simply produce man as a commodity, the commodity-man, man in the role of commodity; it produces him in keeping with this role as *a spiritually and physically dehumanized being*" (emphasis is added, Marx 2011, 61). Accordingly, Marx looks at bourgeois society through the *wounds* that this social structure creates in the lives and souls of humans.

A critical aspect of bourgeois society is that human activity (labor) loses its *reality* in its relation to capital: "In labor all natural, spiritual and social variety of individual activity is manifested and variously rewarded, while dead capital always shows the same face and is indifferent to the *real* individual activity" (Marx 2011, 13). In this encounter with "the same face" of capital that is indifferent to their activities, workers lose not only the reality of their activities but also their individuality. The existence and activities of workers "are increasingly concentrated in the hands of the capitalist" (14). It is precisely this suffering, which stems from the reduction of their existence and activities to abstract labor, that unites (or totalizes) them as *the* working class. In other words, the loss of individuality for each member builds up the working class.

Life is taken from the worker not only figuratively, but also physical death, too, is attached to this mode of existence. Marx writes, "The more they wish to earn, the more must they sacrifice their time and carry out slave-labor, in the service of avarice completely losing all their freedom, thereby *they shorten their lives*. This shortening of their life-span is a favorable circumstance for the working class as a whole, for a result of it an ever-fresh supply of labor becomes necessary. This class has always to sacrifice a part of itself in order not to be wholly destroyed" (emphasis in original, Marx 2011, 13).

The concept of *alienation* is a key for Marx in the *Manuscripts of 1844* as a ground to define the distorted existence of human beings in capitalist relations. Alienation, which appears at every stance of the whole system, is an expression and an aspect of the relationship between capital and labor, where labor produces its own devaluation (and hence devaluation of the life of the worker) while creating value.

The first aspect of alienation is the alienation of the workers from their products. The product of labor confronts its producer as an independent and hostile power. This alien power obtains its value through devaluing its producer. Marx calls it "the *objectification* of labor," as the product of labor has been congealed in an object. Through this objectification, the workers lose control over their lives: "The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object. Whatever the product of his labor is, he is not. Therefore, the greater this product, the less he himself" (Marx 2011, 51). Here, alienation is an expression of the wounds of the proletariat in capitalist relations of production where the worker is reduced to the work, and human activity is reduced to abstract labor driven by calculable technological processes.

Marx points out the second aspect of alienation within the producing activity itself. While their labor becomes external to the workers in the production process, they do not confirm but deny themselves and do not feel content but "unhappy" (Marx 2011, 52). In the words of Marx, the worker "is at home when he is not working, and when he is working, he is not at home" (52). For Marx, being "unhappy" and "not feeling at home" in the producing activity are parts of alienation because they show the inherently coerced nature of labor in the capitalist mode of production. Here labor is "not a satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it" (original emphasis, 52). Consequently, human life is reduced to means of subsistence through labor, which is ironically a life-producing activity (54). Hence for the workers, "life itself appears only as a *means to life*" (emphasis in original, Ibid.).

The reduction of life (and human activity) to means to live also alienates humans as a "species being" (as opposed to "an essential being" of animals), which constitutes the third aspect of alienation for Marx.[1]

The fourth aspect of alienation is alienation "of man from man," which Marx points out with the following words: "Hence within the relationship of estranged labor each man views the other in accordance with *the standard and the position* in which he finds himself as worker" (emphasis added, Marx 2011, 55). This understanding of alienation in Marx, first of all, underlines that alienation spreads throughout the whole society as an *expression* as well as a *condition of possibility* of devaluation of human existence. As I discuss below, later in *Capital Volume I*, Marx will elaborate on how the commodity logic becomes the logic of social existence as such. However, in my understanding, this insight of Marx also opens up a window for us to reflect upon similarities between the devaluation of the life of the workers in capitalist relations and other forms of dehumanization, discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization in society.

On the one hand, an understanding of social existence from one's own standard and position refers to the loss of self-respect and dignity for the subaltern groups. On the other hand, the same positional understanding might provide an epistemological advantage for them to understand the workings of modern society.[2]

For Marx, labor and capital constitute each other on the basis of alienation. Throughout the *Manuscripts of 1844*, he underlines two features of labor relations in bourgeois society. First, the workers are reduced to their labor, and therefore, the workers' existence is "brought under the same condition as the existence of every other commodity" (Marx 2011, 12). The reduction of labor to wage-earning activity also brings about the second feature of labor relations, which is workers' lives are reduced to their means of subsistence. This reduction creates a crash in the social existence of the workers and devaluates their lives as human beings. That is why Marx states that "society always and necessarily stands opposed to the interest of the worker" (16). In fact, society arises at the expense of the workers:

> The more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more values he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes; the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker, the more civilized his object, the more barbarous becomes the worker, the more ingenious labor becomes, the duller becomes the worker and the more he becomes nature's bondsman. . . . It is true that labor produces for the rich wonderful things—but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces—but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty—but for the worker, deformity. It replaces labor by machines—but some of the workers it throws back to a barbarous type of labor, and the other workers it turns into machines. It produces intelligence—but for the worker idiocy, cretinism. (51–52)

The quote above reflects a deep philosophical analysis of the loss of humanity in modern society where "civilization" is based on the symbolic and physical death of large groups of people and "humanity" is built on their dehumanization. But there is more than that. Not only activities and lives of human beings are reduced to work, but also their existence becomes unthinkable without work. Consequently, out of work, the working class appears as a population needed to be managed. Here comes another insightful quote from young Marx: "[Political economy] does not consider him [the worker] when he is not working, as a human being; but leaves such consideration to criminal law, to

doctors, to religion, to the statistical tables, to politics and to the workhouse beadle" (Marx 2011, 17).

From the analysis of alienation, we can deduce that what is dehumanizing for Marx seems to be the split between human life and labor, which, in these relations, sucks the worker's blood and flesh. The workers not only lose their lives and the products of their activities, but also these products become hostile to them. These exploitative labor relations based on inequality in society create wounds in human social existence and bring about exclusion and marginalization by devaluing the workers' lives. In the end, the workers not only lose a place to call home in society, but they also lose their self-respect and dignity because they come to understand social existence from their diminished position in society.

Franco Moretti's analysis of Frankenstein's creature seems highly fruitful in approaching the concept of alienation. In his intriguing article *The Dialectic of Fear,* Moretti analyses Frankenstein's creature and Dracula figures as literary expressions of the fear of the worker and capital in nineteenth-century bourgeois civilization. While "the disfigured wretch" Frankenstein's creature symbolizes the worker, "the ruthless proprietor" Dracula refers to capital;[3] "the two horrible faces of a single society" (Moretti 1982, 67). Frankenstein's invention, for Moretti, is a metaphor for the process of capitalist production, "which forms by deforming, civilizes by barbarizing, enriches by impoverishing" (71). When we look at the features of the monster, like the proletariat, the monster is denied a name and individuality. Like speaking of "a Ford worker," he belongs wholly to his creator, "like the proletariat, he is a *collective* and *artificial* creature. He is not found in nature, but built" (69). Indeed, Frankenstein's creature seems a good metaphor for alienation in that the processes that reduce the workers to their abstract labor make them *the* working class by stripping the workers from their humanity and taking away their control over their own lives. Moretti underlines that the loss of humanity for the workers, or being "disfigured," can only happen as a social relation: "In fact it is impossible 'physically,' to estrange a man from himself, to dehumanize him. But alienated labour, as a social relation, makes it possible" (73).

The Frankenstein's creature metaphor is also influential in emphasizing that alienation is also about the exclusion and marginalization of the proletariat in modern society. The creature wishes to have rights of citizenship, but he is considered not enough human to have these rights in a similar way that Marx refers to the proletariat as "living *in* a society but not being a member *of* this society" (Marx 1998, 13). Exclusion and marginalization of the proletariat is a part of their social existence and therefore an aspect of their "disfigurement."

Alienation is the expression of the *disfiguration* of the workers when their lives flow away in these relations. The idea of "human" in modern society, together with *his* "reason" and "rights," is produced by stripping the worker from her humanity. In these relations, the workers appear to have no life of their own, no autonomous existence, and no intelligence. In other words, for Marx, the labor process in the capitalist mode of production, which is based on value creation, necessarily produces a devaluation of life for the workers.

The *disfigured* as a form of social existence in modern society has been widely referred to in literature. For example, Silvia Federici refers to the figure of "Caliban" from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as the representation of the proletarian body and the colonized body (Federici 2004, 11). Frantz Fanon (1968) calls the people under colonial domination "*les damnés*" (the damned, translated in English editions as "the wretched"). In his novel *Har*, Murat Uyurkulak (2006) calls the victims and witnesses of the Kurdish war in Turkey *yamuk* (the crooked or the disfigured). In these examples, the disfigurement of some groups symbolizes not only their exclusion and marginalization but also their crippling power over the workings of society. As in Baudelaire's poem "The Eyes of the Poor," the Parisian boulevard cannot escape its dark shadow because, in the words of Berman, the trouble in "the eyes of the poor is simply that they will not go away. They, too, want a place in the light" (Berman 1988, 153).[4]

Society of Equivalency: The Commodity Form

Derek Sayer, in his *Violence of Abstraction* (1987), suggests that Marx did not conceive social reality as atomistical, as made up of clearly bounded, separate, interacting entities, but "he saw the world, rather, as a complex network of internal relations, within which any single element is what it is only by virtue of a relationship to others" (Sayer 1987, 19). This suggestion is perhaps most suitable for Marx's analysis of "the commodity form" at the very first pages of *Capital, Volume I*. Marx introduces the commodity as the "elementary form" of the capitalist mode of production (Marx 1976, 125), and therefore, starts with the commodity form to analyze a complex web of social relations between commodities, labor, and value. These categories, for Marx, constitute each other and reflect the moments of workings of capitalism.

A closer look at how Marx analyzes these relations provides an interesting angle to observe the processes that constitute a society working on the logic of equivalency. Locating the commodification of labor (human activity) at the center of his attention, Marx gives us additional tools to elaborate on how human subjects lose control over their lives in the presence of structures that are also made of social relations. Thus, in my opinion, Marx's understanding of the

commodity is a good start for discussing the devaluation of human lives, which exposes an impossibility because lives cannot be measurable, comparable, and disposable.

In his analysis of the commodity, Marx closely looks at the disengagement between *use-value* and *exchange-value* in capitalist production. Use-value is about the usefulness of a thing, and it is qualitative, immeasurable, and incommensurable (Marx 1976, 126). On the other hand, exchange value is a question of magnitude that appears as a quantitative relation (126). This quantitative relation is indifferent to use-value in that exchange-value appears accidental and purely relative. If exchange value does not stem from use-value and use-value, as usefulness in things is a part of the commodity form, it means that there is a contradictory conjunction of use-value and exchange value in the capitalist mode of production. However, in the meantime, valid exchange values of a particular commodity (in terms of other commodities) express something equal (127). This contradiction seems to provide an entry point for Marx to analyze "the mystery" behind the commodity form.

For Marx, exchange value is a "form of expression" of another content, and this content is an abstraction that allows commodities to be represented by an equation. In other words, two different things become reducible to a common element that includes an identical magnitude. To explain how this abstraction takes place, Marx gives an example from geometry, where rectilinear figures are split into triangles to determine and compare their areas. In the same way, Marx states, "the exchange values of commodities must be reduced to a common element, of which they represent a greater or lesser quantity" (Ibid.).

But what is the "triangle" of the commodity form? What makes the commodities measurable and comparable? Marx's answer to this question is labor: "If we disregard the use-values of commodities, only one property remains, that of being products of labour" (Marx 1976, 128). Smith (1937 [1776]) and Ricardo (1891), too, consider labor as the source of wealth. Marx differs from them with his emphasis on "abstract labor," a form of labor where human activity loses its specificity. In addition to "abstract labor," Marx introduces two other concepts, "labor-power" and "value," to indicate the metamorphosis of human activity in the capitalist mode of production. While human labor becomes quantifiable in the form of "labor power," "value" represents "congealed quantities of homogenous human labor" (Marx 1976, 128). Exchange-value, value, and labor-power are all the moments of the same abstraction (or the "triangle") in the commodity form, which attaches, in the words of Marx, a "phantom-like objectivity" to commodities (Ibid.). Thanks to this "phantom-like objectivity," entirely different things become quantifiable, measurable, and comparable.

Things appear as commodities only when they gain the second kind of "objectivity" (phantom-like objectivity) in addition to their natural form. The mystery in commodities is that this "objectivity" is purely social. Marx indicates the conception of "commodity fetishism" to underline the inversed reality that stems from the commodity form. He talks about several inversions that follow each other: The first one is that at the passage from labor to labor-power, concrete labor loses its specificity and transforms into abstract labor.

Second, the duration of labor-power transforms into the magnitude of the value form. Last, the social characteristics of labor inversely appear as the relation between products as opposed to human contacts. As a result, "the social characteristics of men's own labour" appear "as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things" (Marx 1976, 164–65).

The inversion of reality in the commodity is so sharp that Marx uses the metaphor of the table standing on its head as soon as it emerges as a commodity (Marx 1976, 163). He calls this substitution "fetishism" not only because the value-relation of the products of labor has no connection with the physical nature of the commodity but also because commodities appear to be in "the fantastic form of a relation" with each other (165). As in Marx's example, the table is not only "standing on its head" but also is "dancing of its own free will" (164).

Marx states that fetishism "attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities" (Marx 1976, 165). To say this does not mean that fetishism occurs at the moment of production. Marx underlines here that the moment of production of things as commodities already includes the specific social relations of capitalism. In other words, "the relation precedes what is related."[5] Exchange is an indispensable part of this social relation since a commodity's value and, therefore, its "socially uniform objectivity" is realized only in exchange (166–67). That is why commodities "relate to each other merely as exchange-value" (167).

Exchange can be considered a scene where fetishism performs its best and curtains the complex web of human activities behind the commodities.[6] In exchange relations, people do the following: "[B]y equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour" (Marx 1976, 166). In other words, the undoable becomes doable, and different kinds of useful private labor become exchangeable. Real human lives and their activities, furthermore, become invisible. According to Marx, this is only possible through abstract labor. Thus, what makes commodities comparable is another aspect of the same abstraction pro-

cess that makes the concrete activities of real human beings invisible (i.e., the disappearance of concrete labor).

The mystical character of the commodity arises neither from its use-value nor from being a product of labor but from the commodity form itself, i.e., production of it as a commodity in the capitalist mode of production. Value operates like a magic wand here. Marx states that "value . . . does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic (Marx 1976, 167). As being congelation of this specific social relation, value adds a socially imagined "objectivity" to things. It transforms objects of utility into measurable and calculable commodities by hiding the actual human activities behind them. Therefore, value is not *a thing* to be defined or calculated but rather *a sign* where we can read the social product of a specific social relation that we call capitalism.

Marx considers his attempt to analyze the value form as deciphering the hieroglyphics "to get behind the secret of . . . [humans'] own social product" (Marx 1976, 167). Marx's deciphering of the social hieroglyphics might provide insight into the conditions of possibility for dividing human lives worthy of living from those not worth living. First of all, if capitalism is a specific social relation where labor loses its specificity and transforms into abstract labor, it can be deduced that the workers' lives also lose their specificity and become just numerical entities. Furthermore, this historically specific social relation provides a ground for an understanding of equivalency as a universal possibility and even a general rule by making the use-value irrelevant. There is no reason not to assume that this understanding of equivalency spreads over the whole social fabric. Accordingly, immeasurable things, including human life, appear to be measurable and, therefore, comparable and dispensable.

Worthless Bodies in the Machine-Like Social Existence

In *Capital Volume I*, Marx dedicates long pages to discussing the effects of machinery in the production process. Especially the fifteenth chapter of the book, titled "Machinery and The Large-Scale Industry," contains illuminating insights into the precariousness of human life in capitalist relations. Marx introduces large-scale industry as the revolution in the instruments of labor and the modern factory system as its most highly developed form (Marx 1976, 527). The modern factory system is the organization of the system of machinery where the workers are distributed among the specialized machines. Taking the exchange of commodities as the basis, the machinery "serves as a means systematically getting more work done within a given period of time, in other words, constantly exploiting labour-power more intensively" (544). The machine in

capitalist production is far beyond being a tool or a material instrument of labor. The machine "makes use of" humans (548).

> [In handcrafts and manufacture] the movements of the instrument of labour proceed from [the worker], [in machinery] it is the movements of the machine that he must follow. In manufacture the workers are the parts of a living mechanism. In the factory we have *a lifeless mechanism* which is independent of the workers, who are incorporated into it as its *living appendages*. (Ibid., emphasis added)

The factory system, therefore, represents a complete rule of *the dead* over *the living*. Dead labor in the form of capital transforms living human activity into a tool and "dominates and soaks up living labour-power" in the factory (Marx 1976, 548). Stripped of any qualities peculiar to them, the workers turn out to be just a cog in the machine.

The subordination of human life to the machinery is not only the result, or the "collateral damage," but an intrinsic part of the modern factory system. The revolution in the production process, Marx states, took place "at the expense of the workers" (Marx 1976, 586). In the sections where Marx gives a historical account of the developments in the factory system, he uses a fascinating expression to indicate the worker's expendable position in the production process: *"Experimenta in corpore vili,* like those of anatomists on frogs, were actually made here. . . . These experiments were not made just at the expense of the worker's means of subsistence. His five senses also had to play the penalty" (586).

Experimenta in corpore vili is the Latin expression for "experiments on a worthless body." The expression *corpore vili* refers to something further than the reduction of human activity to a commodity in the production process. What is at stake in *corpore vili* is the disposability of human life at the modern machine. Related to the processes that make humans a cog or "the living appendage" of the machine, human life appears to be expendable and examinable for the improvement of the machine.[7]

The "worthless body" of the worker is disposable when it is not needed anymore, just like any useless machine part. When the worker is driven out of the machinery, Marx states, they become a part of the labor power at "*the disposal of capitalist exploitation*" (original emphasis, Marx 1976, 567). In a system of production that is based on the worker's sale of labor-power as a commodity, the machinery operates to reduce this labor-power to "a special tool" through division of labor and "when it becomes the job of the machine to handle this tool," both the use-value and exchange-value of this "commodity" disappear

(557). Then, in the words of Marx, "The worker becomes unsaleable, like paper money thrown out of currency by legal enactment" (Ibid.).

Machinery necessarily destroys the "conditions of existence" of the number of workers to increase productivity in the self-valorization of capital (Marx 1976, 557). That is why Marx repeatedly emphasizes that the machine is the workers' competitor rather than an instrument of labor. A section of workers is always rendered superfluous, and this suffering is never temporary. As Marx states, machinery "produces chronic misery among the workers who compete with it" (557). Thus, the production of an "industrial reserve army," or the "disposals of capitalist exploitation," is an indispensable part of the modern factory system.

Worse, machinery in capitalist production expands the factory to the whole life. Marx underlines that rather than being material instruments of production, machinery is "*the form of society* which utilizes those instruments" (emphasis added, Marx 1976, 555). Machinery transforms, Marx points out, "the worker, *from his very childhood*, into a specialized machine" (emphasis added, 547).

At this point, Marx's emphasis on discipline in the modern factory system deserves particular attention. Marx explains that as the aim of capitalist production is to extract the greatest possible amount of surplus value, it drives the exploitation of labor-power to the greatest possible extent. In the complete system of the factory, "the technical subordination of the worker to the uniform motion of the instruments of labour," Marx notes, gives rise to a "barrack-like" discipline (Marx 1976, 549). In this regard, the division among the laborers is an essential part of the discipline that controls the labor process. The discipline in the factory system divides "the worker into manual labourers and overseers, into private soldiers and the N.C.O.s [non-commissioned officers] of an industrial army" (Ibid.).

In his *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault focuses on this aspect of the machinery and elaborates on the novelty of the discipline stemming from the factory system. Discipline must respond, notes Foucault, "to construct a machine whose effect will be maximized by the concerted articulation of the elementary parts of which it is composed" (Foucault 1995, 164). Foucault continues as follows:

> Discipline is no longer simply an art of distributing bodies, of extracting time from them and accumulating it, but of composing forces in order to obtain an efficient machine. . . . The individual body becomes an element that may be placed, moved, articulated on others. Its bravery or its strength are no longer the principal variables that define it; but the place it occupies, the interval it cov-

> ers, the regularity, the good order according to which it operates its movements. . . . *The body is constituted as a part of a multi-segmentary machine.* (Ibid., emphasis added)

Thus, machinery in capitalism is a total revolution in the relationship between human beings and their labor. It is also a battlefield of the antagonism between the capital (the dead) and the worker (the living). The machinery represents the domination of lifeless mechanisms over living human activities, rendering the useless cogs (including human lives) dispensable. Furthermore, Marx portrays the factory as a form of social existence: The whole social fabric operates as a machine, and it constantly produces disposability.

Marx's dystopic portrayal of machinery and large-scale industry is shared by other prominent sociologists in the literature. George Simmel, for example, has reflected upon the consequences of a machine-like social existence. He observes the position of the individual in society as follows: "The individual has become *a mere cog* in an enormous organization of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality, and value in order to transform them from their subjective form into the form of a purely objective life" (emphasis added, Simmel (2016 [1903], 151–152). What Simmel states as "the enormous organization of things and powers" are, according to Bauman (1989), the constitution of the *necessary* condition of the Holocaust. Quoting Henry Feingold, Bauman underlines that "[Auschwitz] was also a mundane extension of the modern factory system. Rather than producing goods, the raw material was human beings, and the end-product was death, so many units per day marked carefully on the manager's production charts" (Bauman 1989, 8).

Besides the underlying role of the matter-of-fact efficiency, technology, and organization, which go hand in hand with bureaucratic rationality and means-ends calculus in the Holocaust, Bauman points out the significance of "the mediation of action," which is "one of the most salient and seminal features of modern society" (Bauman 1989, 25). The mediation of action is the phenomenon that signifies "the physical and/or psychic distance between the act and its consequences" (Ibid.). This phenomenon engenders invisibility within parts of the system and hides the connections between the different actions in the same system. Bauman states that the mediation of action "was the method of making invisible the very humanity of the victims" (26). Bauman's reflection on the Holocaust through an understanding of the workings of modern society provides us with another angle to look at the modern factory system as a form of social life. In this way, as Bauman underlines, "the horrors of genocide will have become virtually indistinguishable from other sufferings that modern society undoubtedly generate daily—and in abundance" (6).

Conclusion: Reclaiming Life Against Dehumanization

This article began with the words attributed to Al-Hallaj—"Hell is not the place where we suffer; it is the place where no one hears our suffering"—to foreground a condition more devastating than pain itself: the silencing of pain, the failure of recognition, and the exclusion of entire communities from the category of the human. For many oppressed and marginalized groups, this silence is not metaphorical. It is material. It takes the form of ungrieved deaths, unheard suffering, and lives rendered unintelligible. Taking this condition as a starting point, the article asked how we might ethically and analytically engage with such silences—and what conceptual tools could help trace the structures that produce them.

In response, I turned to Marx not to reinstate him as a universal authority, but instead to explore whether a selective and careful reading of his work could offer insights into the material and symbolic dimensions of dehumanization. Rather than discarding Marxism due to its limitations in addressing racialized, gendered, and colonized forms of oppression, I argued that Marx's method, rooted in the standpoint of emancipation, remains vital for understanding how certain lives become disposable.

Marx's early writings on alienation offer more than a critique of labor under capitalism. They present a theory of wounded life. Alienation is not only separation from the product of labor, but a deep ontological injury: a disfigurement of the soul, a fragmentation of being, a loss of self-recognition. The worker no longer belongs to herself; her activity is coerced, her product estranged, her body and mind reduced to function. In *Capital*, Marx expands these insights, tracing how the commodity form mystifies human relations and how the factory system transforms labor into an appendage of the machine. Machinery, in Marx's account, is not merely a technical instrument—it is a form of social existence. It disciplines bodies, reorganizes time, and produces entire populations as surplus. In this system, human beings may be treated as *corpore vili*—worthless bodies, sacrificed in the name of efficiency and value.

Yet even in this portrayal of dehumanization, Marx insists that social change is possible. His method of critique begins not from abstraction but from the historical conditions that make emancipation thinkable. Reading Marx through the lens of life means confronting capitalism as a social relation that is neither eternal nor natural, but historical—and therefore transformable. It means recognizing that even the most durable forms of disposability are constructed and can be dismantled.

This is where the Kurdish slogan *Berxwedan jîyan e* enters not merely as a political phrase, but also as an ontological claim. Emerging in the face of in-

tense state violence in 1990s Turkey, when Kurdish existence was reduced to mere biological survival and suffering was deliberately silenced, this slogan asserted that life cannot be separated from resistance. It refuses the idea that one can simply live under conditions of dehumanization. Instead, it insists that to live meaningfully—dignified, audible, visible—one must resist the power forms that seek to erase life's worth. Resistance here is not an act of defiance added to life; it is what makes life possible at all.

Placing this ontological claim in conversation with Marx's structural critique is not an attempt to align two distinct traditions but instead to allow them to speak to one another through a shared concern: the struggle over what counts as life. Marx's analysis of alienation, the commodity form, and the machine all point toward a world in which life is objectified, disfigured, and made exchangeable. Under capitalism, life becomes calculable, extractable, and disposable. Alienation is not simply an economic condition but it is a wound to human existence, stripping it of place, dignity, and recognizability. The worker becomes a cog in the machine, her labor a number, her suffering an unseen consequence of the system's smooth functioning.

To read Marx through the lens of life is to expose the conditions that reduce human beings to instruments of production, and to affirm that these conditions are neither inevitable nor irreversible. Capitalism's most brutal aspects are not the result of individual cruelty but of historically produced social relations. If these relations have a history, they can be transformed. Emancipation, in Marx's thought, is not a distant ideal but the very perspective from which critique emerges. It is a method grounded in the possibility of transformation.

Reclaiming Marx in this way is not about reaffirming a fixed tradition but about returning with different questions—questions shaped by wounds, by histories of struggle, and by lives made disposable under contemporary forms of structural violence. It is an approach grounded in the ethical and political imperative to read Marx electively and attentively, with an eye toward what his method can offer when approached from the margins. In placing Marx alongside the Kurdish slogan *Berxwedan jîyan e*, I have sought to recover a language of critique rooted not only in the analysis of capital, but also in the lived experience of dehumanization. This is not resistance for the sake of survival alone—it is resistance as a generative force, a way of reclaiming life on terms that capitalism seeks to foreclose.

Resistance, then, is not the opposite of life. It is life made audible under conditions of silence and erasure. It is the practice through which the silenced speak, the wounded assert their dignity, and the excluded demand a world in which they are no longer rendered expendable. To begin from this under-

standing is to read Marx not only as a critic of exploitation, but as a thinker who offers conceptual tools for confronting the abstractions that obscure violence and suppress the value of life. It is to engage Marx's thought on alienation not as an answer but as a method for imagining otherwise from the standpoint of those whose very existence has been made a site of struggle.

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NOTES

1. Marx explains alienation as species being as such: "It is just in the working-up of the objective world, therefore, that man first really proves himself to be a *species being*. This production is his active species reality. The object of labor is, therefore, the *objectification of man's species life*: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore contemplates himself in a world that he has created. In tearing away from man the object of his production, therefore, estranged labor tears from him his *species life*, his real species objectivity, and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him" (emphases are original, Marx 2011, 55).
2. George Lukács's conceptualization of the "standpoint of the proletariat," W. E. B. Du Bois's "double consciousness" for the African Americans in the US society (Du Bois 1994), and feminist standpoint epistemology developed by Donna Haraway (1988) and others might be considered some examples of this epistemological advantage.
3. The vampire metaphor is used by Marx himself to define the bourgeoisie in *Capital Volume I*.
4. In "The Eyes of the Poor," Baudelaire also refers to the point that class divisions in the Parisian boulevard create a split within the modern self and tears apart individuals from each other: "So difficult is it to understand one another, my dear angel, and so incommunicable is thought, even between people in love!" Probably because of this, Walter Benjamin sees in Baudelaire's poetry *both* the "total merger of the modern self with the modern city and total alienation from it" (Berman 1988, 147).

5. I am indebted to Professor William Haver for this sentence. He wonderfully reflected upon the relations between categories in Marx's imagination in his *Temporalities of Capital 2012* class at Binghamton University.

6. Foucault (2001) provides an illuminating insight into the distance between a thing and its representation in the system of exchange relations. In *The Order of Things,* where he develops the notion of *episteme*, Foucault indicates the parallels in the development of linguistics, biology, and economics. The configuration of what he calls Classical *episteme,* which dominated the seventeenth and eighteenth century thought, includes the following: "the continuum of representation and being, an ontology defined negatively as an absence of nothingness, a general representability of being, and being as expressed in the presence of representation" (224). It is this *episteme* that allowed the value of things to be calculated as prices. Foucault expresses it as follows: "All wealth is *coinable*; and it is by this means that it enters into *circulation*—in the same way that any natural being was *characterizable*, and could thereby find its place in a *taxonomy*; that any individual is *nameable* and could find its place in an *articulated language*; that any representation was *signifiable* and could find its place, in order to be *known*, in a *system of identities and differences"* (emphases in original, 190). Rather than labor relations, however, Foucault emphasizes the constituent role of exchange as an *action* of value (216).

7. Derrida's conceptualization of "carnivorous sacrifice" seems analogous with Marx's "*experimenta in corpore vili*." For Derrida, carnivorous sacrifice is the basis of Western culture and law. He explains carnivorous sacrifice as follows: "There have been, there are still, many 'subjects' among mankind who are not recognized as subjects and who receive this animal treatment. . . . What we confusedly call 'animal,' the living thing as living and nothing else, is not a subject of the law or of law (*droit*). . . . [T]hese are considered to be either archaisms or still marginal and rare phenomena not constitutive of our culture. In our culture, carnivorous sacrifice is fundamental, dominant, and regulated by the highest industrial technology, as is biological experimentation on animals—vital to our modernity" (Derrida 1992, 18–19). Derrida further states, "carnivorous sacrifice is essential to the structure of subjectivity, which is also to say the founding of the intentional subject and to the founding, if not of the law, at least of law (*droit*)" (Ibid.).

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