

REFLECTION ARTICLE

## Theory of human capital as a device for the reification of the subject from the perspective of Enrique Dussel's ethics of liberation

Teoría del capital humano como dispositivo de cosificación del sujeto desde la ética de la liberación de Enrique Dussel

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**Abstract** This article critically examines human capital theory through the ethical and political framework of Enrique Dussel's philosophy of liberation. Drawing on a qualitative and critical-hermeneutic methodology, the study analyzes the foundational contributions of Schultz, Becker, and Mincer in order to demonstrate how the theory of human capital reduces the human subject to an economic asset governed by the instrumental rationality of capitalist accumulation. The analysis reveals that this perspective establishes a structural equivalence between human life and capital by transforming education, knowledge, and labor capacities into commodities subjected to market valuation. Furthermore, the study argues that the discourse of meritocracy and individual responsibility conceals historical relations of domination and legitimizes structural inequality through processes of self-exploitation and neoliberal subjectivation. From Dussel's ethics of liberation, this rationality becomes ethically unsustainable because it subordinates the reproduction of concrete human life to the imperatives of productivity, competitiveness, and profitability. The article concludes by proposing the need for an alternative ethical-economic horizon centered on dignity, social justice, and the expanded reproduction of life.

**Keywords** human capital, reification of the subject, liberation ethics, commodification of education, instrumental rationality.

**Resumen** El presente artículo examina críticamente la teoría del capital humano desde la perspectiva ética y política de la filosofía de la liberación de Enrique Dussel. A partir de un enfoque cualitativo, hermenéutico-crítico y de carácter teórico-documental, se analizan los postulados centrales de Schultz, Becker y Mincer con el propósito de demostrar que esta teoría configura una forma contemporánea de cosificación del sujeto al reducir la vida humana a un recurso económico sometido a la racionalidad instrumental del capitalismo. El estudio evidencia que la educación, las capacidades y el conocimiento son reinterpretados como inversiones orientadas a la rentabilidad, estableciendo una equivalencia estructural entre vida y capital. Asimismo, se argumenta que las narrativas meritocráticas y de responsabilidad individual invisibilizan las relaciones históricas de dominación y legitiman desigualdades estructurales mediante procesos de autoexplotación y subjetivación neoliberal. Desde la ética de la liberación de Dussel, dicha racionalidad resulta incompatible con la reproducción digna de la vida humana, ya que subordina la existencia concreta a los imperativos de productividad, competitividad y acumulación. Finalmente, se propone la necesidad de reconstruir horizontes éticos alternativos centrados en la justicia social y la reproducción ampliada de la vida.

**Palabras clave** capital humano, cosificación del sujeto, ética de la liberación, mercantilización de la educación, racionalidad instrumental.

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## Introduction

In recent decades, human capital theory has become consolidated as one of the conceptual pillars of neoclassical economics and of hegemonic discourses on education, labor, and development (Rodríguez et al., 2025). Since the foundational contributions of Schultz (1961), Mincer (1970), and Becker (1964), this theory has promoted the understanding of the human being as a rational agent who invests in themselves with the purpose of increasing their productivity and maximizing their future income. Within this framework, education, training, and competencies are conceived as economic assets susceptible to accumulation, valorization, and profitability, integrating the subject into a strictly instrumental logic governed by market rationality (Álvarez et al., 2021).

However, this conception is neither epistemologically neutral nor ethically innocuous (Sandoval & Hernández, 2018). Human capital theory emerges not merely as an economic framework, but as a broader regime of rationality that reorganizes the meaning of education, labor, and subjectivity according to the imperatives of capitalist productivity. Under this logic, the human being is progressively redefined through calculability, efficiency, and economic performance, thereby diminishing the ethical and historical complexity of human existence (Levine, 2024; Odriozola, 2008). In this way, the subject ceases to be understood as an end in themselves and is reconfigured as a means, resource, or factor of production, which implies a specific form of reification that naturalizes the commodification of existence and legitimizes the subordination of life to capital (Cortés-Campos, 2025; Gómez et al., 2025).

From a critical perspective, this instrumental rationality finds a radical challenge in the ethics of liberation of Enrique Dussel, who proposes an ethical foundation based on the centrality of the concrete life of historically oppressed majorities (Dussel, 1998). For Dussel, all economic, political, or institutional rationality must be evaluated based on its capacity to guarantee the reproduction and development of human life under conditions of dignity (Dussel, 1984). Consequently, any system that sacrifices life in the name of efficiency or profitability incurs a fetishistic inversion of the means of production, characteristic of capitalist modernity and its devices of domination (Dussel, 2023).

Within this horizon, human capital theory can be interpreted as a technology of power that operates through the internalization of the logic of capital within subjectivity, promoting forms of self-exploitation, individual responsibility for poverty, and the legitimization of structural inequality (Beneyto, 2013). Education ceases to be a fundamental right and a common good oriented towards emancipation, to become a private investment whose value depends on its capacity to generate economic returns (Dussel, 2002). Thus, life itself is subsumed under the logic of value, configuring a social order

that prioritizes accumulation over the material reproduction of existence (Garrett, 2025).

In this context, the need arises to critically interrogate the ethical, ontological, and political foundations of human capital theory from a perspective situated in Latin America and committed to the liberation of historically excluded subjects (Dussel, 2007; Bunge, 1997). In particular, it is pertinent to ask: How does human capital theory configure a form of reification of the subject by reducing human life to an economic resource, and how is this instrumental rationality ethically incompatible with the ethics of liberation proposed by Enrique Dussel?

In coherence with this inquiry, the present article aims to critically analyze human capital theory from the perspective of Enrique Dussel's ethics of liberation, in order to demonstrate its reifying character, its reduction of the subject to a commodity, and its subordination of human life to the instrumental rationality of contemporary capitalism. Based on a hermeneutic critique of the foundational texts of human capital and of the principal ethical and political works of Dussel, it seeks to contribute to the construction of a political economy of life that reorients the meaning of education, labor, and development towards horizons of dignity, social justice, and the expanded reproduction of life (Díaz, 2022). Unlike conventional critiques centered exclusively on labor economics or educational inequality, this study contributes a decolonial and ethical interpretation grounded in Latin American philosophy, specifically through Enrique Dussel's ethics of liberation. In doing so, it broadens current debates on neoliberal subjectivation by emphasizing the ethical consequences of reducing human life to economic functionality.

## Methodology

The present research is situated within the critical-hermeneutical approach and adopts a qualitative, theoretical-analytical orientation aimed at examining the ontological, ethical, and political foundations of human capital theory from the perspective of Enrique Dussel's ethics of liberation (Ali et al., 2025; Bunge, 1980). The study is conceived as an epistemological and philosophical documentary investigation, whose purpose is to deconstruct the economic rationalities underlying the construction of the subject as productive within the framework of contemporary capitalism (Bunge, 1969). Based on a hermeneutic critique of the foundational texts of human capital theory, especially the developments by Schultz (1960, 1961), Becker (1983, 2002, 2003), and Mincer (1958, 1970) as well as institutional documents from multilateral organizations that have consolidated this approach in educational and labor policies, its anthropological, economic, and normative assumptions are reconstructed, identifying the central categories that shape the notion of investment in education, productivity, and profitability (Arias

& Maldonado, 2025; Mukherjee et al., 2022).

Similarly, a systematic interpretation of the principal works of Enrique Dussel in the fields of ethics, political philosophy, and the political economy of liberation was conducted, in order to construct a normative framework centered on concrete life, alterity, exteriority, and the critique of economic fetishism (Dussel, 1984, 1998, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2015, 2020, 2023). From this horizon, an exercise of critical contrast between both theoretical corpora was established, aimed at analyzing the mechanisms through which human capital theory configures a form of reification of the subject by reducing human life to a factor of production and an economic asset susceptible to valorization (Mora, 2025; Neugen & Suh, 2023). The documentary corpus was selected according to criteria of theoretical relevance, epistemological coherence, and historical influence within debates on human capital, neoliberalism, and liberation philosophy. This analytical strategy allowed for a comparative reconstruction of the ethical assumptions underlying both theoretical traditions (Bunge, 1980; 1969).

The analysis was supported by qualitative techniques characteristic of the critical analysis of economic discourse and comparative categorical analysis, allowing for the identification of the structures of meaning that organize the productivist framework of human capital and their confrontation with an ethical conception founded on the material reproduction of life (Neugen & Suh, 2023; Mukherjee et al., 2022). In this way, the methodology made it possible to answer the research question through a structural critique that demonstrates the incompatibility between the rationality of human capital and the ethics of liberation, by showing how life is subordinated to the logic of accumulation and economic efficiency (Román et al., 2025; Paramo, 2008).

## Results and discussion

The critical-hermeneutical analysis of the foundational texts of human capital theory allows for the identification that it is structured upon a reductionist anthropological conception that configures the subject as a bearer of a stock of productive capacities susceptible to economic valorization (Álvarez et al., 2018). In the developments of Schultz, Becker and Mincer, as well as in documents from multilateral organizations, education, health, and training are conceptualized as individual investments whose value is expressed in terms of wage returns, marginal productivity, and competitiveness in the labor market (Pimenta, 2024; Becker et al., 1990). This rationality introduces an ontological equivalence between the human being and capital, displacing the condition of subject towards that of an economic resource and subordinating life to its productive functionality. Within this framework, human existence is abstracted from its social, historical, and communal dimensions, to be integrated into

a logic of accumulation that measures its value based on its capacity to generate future income (Deere, 2025; Gómez & Velasco, 2024).

From this perspective, it is evident that human capital theory produces a specific form of reification of the subject, by converting their corporeality, intelligence, creativity, and life time into exchangeable commodities within the labor market (Rodríguez et al., 2026). Under the logic of human capital, subjectivity becomes increasingly subordinated to economic utility. Human capacities are valued primarily according to their profitability and market performance, which transforms education and labor into mechanisms of capitalization rather than spaces for human emancipation or collective flourishing (Laverde et al., 2020). This inversion manifests in the naturalization of individual competition, in the subjective attribution of responsibility for unemployment and poverty, and in the legitimization of inequality as the result of differentiated rational investment decisions. Consequently, the social structure of exploitation is rendered invisible and replaced by a meritocratic narrative that attributes success or failure exclusively to individual performance (Maturana & Andrade, 2019; Jaimes et al., 2018).

The contrast with Enrique Dussel's ethics of liberation allows for the demonstration of the structural incompatibility between the rationality of human capital and an ethics founded on the centrality of concrete life (Merlo, 2024). From the material principle of Dussel's ethics, all economic rationality must be evaluated based on its capacity to guarantee the reproduction and development of human life under conditions of dignity (Reyes, 2023). However, human capital theory operates under an economic utilitarian logic that sacrifices life in the name of efficiency, profitability, and competitiveness, configuring a sacrificial logic characteristic of contemporary capitalism (Rodríguez & Pérez, 2025). In this sense, education ceases to be a fundamental right oriented towards emancipation and is transformed into a commodity whose value depends on its capacity to generate economic returns, thereby reproducing a structure of exclusion that marginalizes those who fail to successfully insert themselves into the market (Teruel, 2024; Salcedo, 2013).

Likewise, the analysis allows for the identification that human capital theory functions as a technology of power that internalizes the logic of capital within subjectivity (Freire & Terjeiro, 2010). The subject is interpellated as an entrepreneur of themselves, responsible for managing their own portfolio of competencies and for assuming the risks derived from labor precarity. This neoliberal subjectivation produces forms of self-exploitation that are presented as freedom and autonomy, concealing the structural relations of domination that condition access to education, employment, and the means for the material reproduction of life. In this way, the rationality of human capital contributes to the legitimization

of a social order that prioritizes capital accumulation over the life of historically excluded majorities (Rodríguez et al., 2026; Gramaglia, 2025).

Consequently, from the Dusselian category of fetishism, it is evident that human capital theory absolutizes economic mediations and presents them as ends in themselves, concealing their historical and contingent character (Leyva, 2023). Productivity, efficiency, and competitiveness are elevated to supreme values, while the concrete life of subjects remains subordinated to these abstractions. This fetishization of economic rationality produces an ethical inversion in which the economy ceases to be at the service of life and life is put at the service of the economy, configuring a structurally unjust social order incompatible with an ethics of liberation (Velasco et al., 2026; Téllez, 2024).

The obtained results confirm that human capital theory does not constitute a neutral or merely technical approach to education and labor, but operates as an epistemological and political device that ontologically reconfigures the subject according to the market-centered rationality of contemporary capitalism (Téllez et al., 2020). This transformation cannot be interpreted solely as a change in economic language; rather, it represents a deeper anthropological reconfiguration in which subjectivity becomes progressively subordinated to market rationality. As a consequence, social recognition increasingly depends on productivity, competitiveness, and individual performance. In this sense, the reduction of the human being to a bearer of productive assets not only implies a semantic transformation of economic language, but a profound mutation in the very understanding of life, which is subsumed under the logic of capital valorization (De Sousa Santos, 2011). This rationality coincides with what Dussel identifies as a fetishistic inversion of means, in which the economy ceases to be a mediation for the reproduction of life and becomes an absolute end that sacrifices concrete existence in the name of efficiency and profitability (Rodríguez, 2024; Dussel, 1984).

From the material ethics of liberation, human capital theory is ethically unsustainable, insofar as it denies the fundamental principle of the centrality of life as the ultimate criterion of legitimacy for all social rationality (Deere, 2025; Dussel, 2023). While for Dussel the economy must be oriented towards guaranteeing the material conditions of possibility for the dignified life of excluded majorities, human capital theory displaces this purpose towards the maximization of individual productivity, configuring a rationality that holds the subject responsible for their own exclusion and naturalizes the structural inequalities of the system (Velasco et al., 2026; Dussel, 2020). At this point, the meritocratic narrative accompanying human capital functions as a legitimizing ideology that conceals historical relations of exploitation and

domination, replacing them with a discourse of individual responsibility and entrepreneurship of the self (Álvarez et al., 2018; Ramírez, 2015).

Likewise, the findings allow for a dialogue with the approaches of critical political economy and studies on neoliberal governmentality, insofar as they demonstrate how human capital theory produces an entrepreneurial subjectivity that internalizes market logic as a normative principle of existence (Garret, 2025; Dussel, 2002). The subject is interpellated as a manager of their own capital, forced to permanently invest in their training, to compete with other equally reified subjects, and to assume the risks derived from labor precarity as if they were free and rational decisions (Teruel, 2024; Dussel, 2007). This form of subjectivation coincides with what Dussel conceptualizes as a form of ethical domination, insofar as it invisibilizes the exteriority of the Other and silences the voice of the system's victims (Pimienta, 2025; Salcedo, 2013).

In this horizon, education ceases to be understood as a fundamental right and as a process of integral formation oriented towards emancipation, to become a commodity whose value depends on its capacity to generate economic returns (Dussel, 2020). This commodification of knowledge reproduces a colonial logic of knowledge, in which knowledges not functional to the market are delegitimized and the situated epistemologies of peoples and communities are subordinated to the standards of productivity and competitiveness imposed by the global North (Dussel, 2002). From the philosophy of liberation, this operation constitutes a form of denial of alterity, insofar as it disregards the material, cultural, and historical conditions of peripheral subjects (Gramaglia, 2025).

Consequently, human capital theory not only reifies the subject, but contributes to the reproduction of a structurally unjust social order, in which the life of the majorities is sacrificed in the name of accumulation (Escobar & Paternina, 2017). In the face of this, the ethics of liberation of Enrique Dussel offers an alternative normative horizon that allows for the reorientation of the economy, education, and labor towards a rationality centered on the expanded reproduction of life (Mora, 2025). From this perspective, it becomes necessary to construct theoretical and political frameworks that overcome the instrumental logic of human capital and restore the primacy of concrete life as the foundation of all legitimate social organization (Levine, 2024).

## Conclusions

The findings demonstrate that human capital theory constitutes a form of economic rationality that reorganizes subjectivity according to the imperatives of productivity, competitiveness, and market valorization. Within this framework, education, knowledge, and labor capacities are reduced to



mechanisms of accumulation, producing processes of commodification that subordinate human existence to economic functionality. From Enrique Dussel's ethics of liberation, this logic becomes ethically unsustainable because it prioritizes efficiency and profitability over the dignified reproduction of concrete human life. Likewise, the study evidences that human capital theory operates as a dispositif of neoliberal governmentality that internalizes market discipline within subjectivity and legitimizes self-exploitation through meritocratic narratives. Such dynamics obscure historically constituted relations of domination while reinforcing exclusionary structures that normalize inequality as an individual responsibility. Consequently, the reduction of life to economic performance consolidates a social order incompatible with emancipatory and decolonial horizons grounded in ethical alterity, social justice, and the primacy of life over capital.

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The author declare that she has no conflict of interest.

#### Author contributions

**Dustin T. Gómez:** Conceptualization, formal analysis, research, methodology, writing the original draft, Writing, review and editing.

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