

Published: January 12, 2026, 6:16 pm

Umair Haque [recently posed a profound question](#). What, he asked, is the opposite of fascism?

His answer was not “democracy,” as many would suppose, but humanism. That, I think, is right, in the sense that we as people should stand equal, whoever we are, without special favour being granted or denied to anyone by any external authority, divine or political.

But having thought about that, another question immediately followed, which is one that [Zoe Gardner has been asking](#) in her invaluable work on migration, and is, if the rights of people come before the rights of states to police borders, how can democracy survive when governments insist on treating migrants as exceptions to humanity?

In my opinion, these two ideas belong together. They force us to confront not only the nature of fascism but also the hollowing out of democracy when states deny the equality of all people.

Fascism and the denial of humanity

First, we need to be clear about what fascism is. I think Umair Haque (whom I have met for coffee in the past) is correct to insist that it is not simply the merger of corporate and state power, or the presence of a charismatic leader, or the subversion of parliaments. Those, and other characteristics, are all symptoms, [many of which are familiarly listed](#). **However, the underlying disease that is fascism is identified by an ideology that separates humanity into “superhuman” and “subhuman” groups. As Umair says:**

“Fascism is the cleavage of human beings into superhuman and subhuman. From that point, all else follows naturally. The atrocities, the horrors, the contempt for the rule of law, the abuses of power, the craving for dictatorship, the cultism, the pageantry—all of it.”

In particular:

*

Rights become conditional, not universal.

*

The rule of law is suspended for those deemed unworthy.

*

Violence becomes justified, and even celebrated, as a test of superiority.

*

Conflict becomes eternal because domination is its own proof of worth.

Importantly, fascism is not a passing aberration; it is a persistent and enduring phenomenon. It is a pseudo-science of superiority and inferiority that denies the possibility of human growth, care, or solidarity. Its justice is violence; its morality is power.

Humanism as the alternative

Second, we must understand why humanism, as noted above, and not democracy, is the true opposite of fascism.

Democracy is an institutional form. It is only as strong as the values that sustain it. Humanism provides those values.

At its core, Haque suggests that humanism rests on three claims:

*

Dignity. Every person, by virtue of being human, possesses equal worth, whoever, whatever, however, and wherever they are.

*

Liberation. Freedom from oppression is not something that is earned, but is rather something that is inherent.

*

Transformation. Human beings are not defined by our genes, biology, or social status; we grow, change, and flourish.

These principles invert fascism. They refuse determinism. They reject division. They locate meaning not in domination but in shared existence.

And here Zoe Gardner's insight becomes indispensable, as it exposes the place where states most blatantly deny these principles today: on their borders.

The Gardner Question

It seems to me that Zoe Gardner poses the question that if the rights of people come

before the rights of states to police borders, how can democracy survive when governments insist on treating migrants as exceptions to humanity? This is not an abstract issue. It goes to the heart of how our politics works now.

At national borders, rights are being suspended. Detention without trial occurs. Pushbacks into the sea can happen. Violent deterrence is happening and is being actively promoted by politicians in many countries. All are being justified in the name of “control.” The result is that borders create zones of exception, where human dignity is stripped away.

To exacerbate that, politicians talk as if rights are inherent in the gift of citizenship, which they wish to confer or withhold on behalf of the state. Zoe Gardner insists on the opposite, that rights are inherent, universal, and indivisible. Denying them does not make them vanish. It only unmasks the injustice of the state.

And then, as Zoe Gardner often notes, migration is cast as a “crisis” or “invasion”, but as she points out, in reality, human movement is normal. It has always happened. It has always enriched societies. It always will. Far from creating brain drains as people move, for whatever reason, she rightly argues that migration creates brain gains from the creation of shared knowledge, culture and experience. The crisis we supposedly face is, in that case, not a crisis at all, but is manufactured as a part of a politics of fear designed to legitimise exclusion.

Gardner’s suggestion is that when states deny human rights at their borders, it is not migrants who weaken democracy. It is governments themselves that do that. By treating migrants as exceptions to humanity, they set the precedent that rights are conditional and not universal. And once rights are conditional for one group, they are fragile for all.

Why this matters for democracy and economics

If we bring Haque and Gardner together, a larger pattern emerges.

Fascism begins with the division of humanity; governments today reproduce that division on their borders. Humanism insists on universality; states resist it by treating rights as privileges of citizenship.

The consequences are profound.

First, democracy itself is eroded. A democracy that excludes people living within its jurisdiction from their rights is hollow. Scapegoating migrants corrodes the very principle of equal citizenship.

Second, the politics of fear reshapes economics. Migrants are framed as burdens to justify austerity, exclusion, and deregulation. In reality, migrants contribute labour, taxes, and creativity. Any cost is not due to migration, but rather from the myths that

governments peddle to sustain hostility.

Third, border exceptionalism legitimises wider injustice. Once it is normal to detain without charge at the border, it becomes easier to normalise surveillance, precarity, and rights erosion inside a society. What begins at the border creeps into everyday life.

Fourth, humanism demands a new political economy. If dignity, liberation and transformation are inherent rights, then economics must serve those ends. This means redistributive taxation, universal public services, protection for workers (including migrants), and fiscal policy focused on inclusion rather than exclusion.

What must we do?

What must we do with these insights? We must turn principle into practice by:

*

Ending border exceptionalism. The same standards of law and rights must apply at the frontier as within it. Indefinite detention, violent deterrence, and arbitrary exclusion must end.

*

Embedding universality. Rights belong to people, not passports. That requires legal reforms to prevent governments from treating migrants as less than human.

*

Reframing migration. Leaders must abandon the language of “crisis” and tell the truth: migration is normal, beneficial, and part of human history.

*

Investing in inclusion. Migrants need housing, education, healthcare, and work, not as favours, but as the foundations of dignity, and as the basis for the contribution they will make to the places where they will live.

*

Defending democracy. Those who live in a community should have a voice in its decisions. Local voting rights, workplace protections, and access to justice are part of that. Denying these rights to those treated as migrants denies the importance of democracy itself.

*

Exposing the ideology. Anti-migrant politics is not neutral. It is a deliberate strategy of fear and division. Naming it is the first step in defeating it.

Humanism, fiscal justice, and the economy of care

This debate cannot be separated from economics. Fascism dehumanises, and neoliberalism, in its own way, has prepared the ground by reducing people to economic

units whose worth is measured only in productivity and cost. If we are serious about this approach to human dignity, we must also be serious about fiscal and tax justice.

*

Taxation must be redistributive. If dignity is universal, then so too must be the claim on society's wealth. Progressive taxation is not just efficient; it is the fiscal expression of human equality as it requires that each contribute according to their means.

*

Fiscal rules must serve people, not markets. Deficit limits that prevent investment in housing, health or education perpetuate exclusion. Fiscal policy must be redesigned to prioritise inclusion and care.

*

Wealth must be accountable. A society that allows the wealthy to hoard assets that are free to move across borders to save tax, whilst migrants are denied shelter and work is not democratic. It is already on the path to fascism.

*

Public services are human rights in practice. Healthcare, education, housing and security are how dignity becomes real. To underfund them, or to deny them to some groups, is to fracture democracy.

*

Borders are economic fictions as much as political ones. Labour markets are international, supply chains are global, and climate change is borderless. Pretending borders can protect "our" wealth while denying rights to those displaced by global crises is dishonest.

Humanism, as I am defining it, requires that economic life be organised around care and survival, not scarcity and fear. The politics of exclusion has always hidden behind economic myths — about "burdens," "affordability," or "fiscal responsibility." These must be confronted as directly as the myths about migration itself.

Conclusion: Humanising democracy and economics

Umair Haque is right: fascism is the division of humanity, and its opposite is humanism, or a united humanity.

Zoe Gardner is also right: borders are where human rights and humanity itself are most often denied, and democracy cannot survive if migrants are treated as exceptions to humanity.

The lessons are unavoidable. To defend democracy, we must protect and defend universality.

To resist fascism, we must resist border exceptionalism.

To build an economy fit for human beings, we must root it in dignity, liberation, and transformation.

We are left with a choice. Define ourselves by fear of outsiders, and we hollow out democracy until little or nothing remains. Define ourselves by humanism and our common humanity, and we can build a politics of care, equality and survival.

That, ultimately, is what the questions these two thinkers raise are all about. They force us to see that democracy is not just about how we vote, but about how we treat the most vulnerable. Answer wrongly, and we open the door to fascism and the logic of the division between the superhuman and the subhuman, which is a division that does not exist except in the minds of those intent on abuse. Answer rightly, and we make humanism and human equality real, not only in politics, but in the economy that sustains us.

Comments

When commenting, please take note of this blog's comment policy, [**which is available here**](#). ***Contravening this policy will result in comments being deleted before or after initial publication at the editor's sole discretion and without explanation being required or offered.***