Critical Theory Summer School 2022: Politics of Needs
A Summary

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The Politics of Needs was the topic of the 2022 Critical Theory Summer School. Hence, through the discussion of both classic and contemporary texts on the matter, we addressed some basic questions on the role of needs for critical social theory from a variety of perspectives. For instance: How should we understand needs theoretically? What, if any, is an appropriate method of needs critique? And might needs be politicized in praxis? A fruitful dialogue between critical theory, the political philosophy of needs, needs-based theories of justice and needs-based ethics allowed us to inquire about socio-ontological approaches to needs as well as forms and strategies of needs critique, not to mention some tensions and dilemmas that haunt this polemical concept. The summary here intends to outline the main themes, arguments and questions that were developed throughout our discussions.

How to understand needs? In the first place, the analysis of needs involves a departure from the view that an instrumental framework always adequately defines needs or, in other words, that the satisfaction of needs functions as a mere means for achieving an external end. The formal schema "A needs X for Y" is in this regard too one-sided, because it tends to reduce needs to their everyday satisfiers. However, we have certains needs, such as autonomy and mobility, which are ends in themselves. This means that the interpretation and satisfaction of needs are not static: they change through history, depending on the material conditions and the interpretative schemes of social agents. This theoretical insight allows one to avoid reifying the present, given ways of satisfying needs and thus rendering them immune to critique and transformation (Hamilton 2003, 51). Needs, one could argue, is a constitutively contested concept.

A second central step in needs analysis is grouping of needs into need categories, and marking off needs from wants, desires and interests. A theorist's approach in this regard depends in part on how they conceive of the formation and emergence of needs. In political and ethical theories of need, it is important to identify which needs must be met, while keeping in mind the complex interplay between needs, wants, desires and interests. It can thus be analytically and politically useful to maintain a category of 'basic needs,' where the fundamentality of these needs rests on a combination of the requisites for biological survival and agency, or the composites of full human functioning in a particular social context. Some may choose to craft an open-ended list of needs (Miller 2011) and others may instead describe a schema of needs forms as a heuristic tool to track the normative and the causal properties of needs (Hamilton 2003). However, following the tradition of Hegel (2012) and Marx (2010), needs critique may stand in tension with the concept of 'basic needs.' Alienation and ideology critique, for example, stands in tension with sustaining a robust concept of vital needs. By being framed as 'vital,' these needs might also be easily naturalized by expert discourses, and become a vehicle for paternalism. The same goes for any other prioritized needs category that may be insulated from social critique or democratic processes precisely because of its attributed 'urgency.' Ultimately, the Summer School participants took varying stances on the normative importance of identifying some needs as

more urgent than others. In this way, the debate went back and forth on the political, and maybe even rhetorical, role of 'basic needs.'

Since needs are only plausibly thought to be socially constituted and particular to socio-historical contexts, one must pay attention to the formation and emergence of needs. Marx, Adorno (2017), Horkheimer (2019), and Marcuse (1964), all articulate how the experience of necessity can be real, and in this sense true, but at the same time false because its satisfaction reproduces repressive (capitalist) conditions of domination. This insight turns out to be of critical importance not least for a needs-based theory of justice. As Frank Nullmeier (2020) points out, frameworks of corrective justice may blame people for the needs they have, and use this guilt to avoid meeting their very needs. For example, we might think of people being blamed for being poor. This indicates the importance of analyzing not just which needs people claim to have, but also why these needs-claims arise in the first place. Moreover, given that needs are at least in part constituted through plural social practices and institutions in contestation with one another, the Summer School highlighted that one must focus on the inequality within the processes of need formation, including epistemic inequality with regards to the sociocultural means of communication and interpretation of needs (see Fraser 1989). In a nutshell, this suggests that needs-talk is neither inherently emancipatory nor inherently repressive, but instead multivalent and open to political contestation and change. A key conclusion drawn at the Summer School was therefore the necessity of constructing a counter-hegemonic discourse, where needs-talk represents one node of a more general struggle against financialized neoliberal capitalism (see Fraser 2022). We also discussed the position of social theorists in that struggle, who should accessibly articulate their critical diagnoses on needs into that more encompassing counter-hegemonic discourse.

Now, Marxist critique of needs centrally considers not only how needs are formed, but also how needs are met or not met within capitalist societies that, as it is well known, constantly revolutionize their productive forces through technology. In this regard, the Summer School focused at length on the aporetic tension between Marcuse's conception of technological rationality and the ideal role of technology in liberation, which would include the non-repressive satisfaction of needs and the creation of novel, non-repressive needs. Hence we discussed the question of whether there is, or not, or to what extent, an inherently oppressive and instrumentalizing character of technology (see Adorno & Horkheimer 1987, Cooke 2022). Apropos of the topic of emancipation, we found Agnes Heller's concept of 'radical needs' helpful in challenging some of the aporias left by the early Frankfurt School and their rather pessimistic diagnoses of late capitalism. Citing Marx' *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Heller uses the concept of 'radical' needs in the Marxian sense of going to the root of social problems in order to think of real possibilities of change. Indeed, under the system of capitalist alienation, the needs of the working class are reduced to "paltry particular needs and interest" (Heller 1976, 88-9), but at the same time they also develop needs that are potentially revolutionary, in so far as these needs produce consciousness of capitalist alienation. Heller dwells paradigmatically on the need for free time and its revolutionary potential. In our case, participants of the Summer School discussed the idea of framing care work as a radical need as well.

Although care only received explicit attention in the School's last session, our discussion of care ethics as an ethics of need generated rich questions on the relationship between ethics and social theory. The Summer School was committed to the necessary intertwinement of the ethics of need with the politics of need. This opens onto the question of how critique can mesh into moral responsibility, to which Sarah Clark Miller suggested that having proper knowledge of social power is required to properly fulfill the duty to care, or the moral responsibility to meet others' fundamental needs. Further work is required to relate individual moral commitments to care with politics that cultivate social structures of care, a politics that seeks to transform uneven dependencies into persistent reciprocity.

Indeed, a subtle but important theme running through all texts was the relationality of needs, specifically that they imply interdependence. Under a Hegelian system of needs, this interdependence is thought rather harmoniously in civil society, where the division of labor multiplies and refines needs as well as the means for their satisfaction, thus contributing to the enhancement of general wealth. However, Hegel does emphasize the problem of poverty as a seemingly necessary result of a market economy: the emergent rabble represents in this sense an unsolved problem in the midst of ethical life. In contrast, a Marxian critique of capitalism reveals that the market economy structurally enshrines oppressive dependencies, precarity and crisis: as a result, the multiplication of needs doesn't lead primarily to refinement and wealth, but rather to the deprivation and impoverishment of the needs of the working class. In any case, relationality, thought especially through interdependence, turned out to be a central domain of needs analysis and a possible locus of critique.

Finally, while the early Marx relies on a philosophical anthropology —specifically on the idea of 'species being'— to provide the critical bite of his needs critique, Maeve Cooke urges the critical theorist to turn to an idea of the good (Cooke 2006, 2022). Cooke's suggestion responds to the claim made by Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse that advanced capitalist society reduces our consciousness of species needs. Should one follow Cooke, needs-claims must be evaluated using a conception of the good as a transcendent object, which also serves as a measure required to deliberate in a maximally inclusive democratic dialogue. This approach could allow the theorist to avoid both authoritarianism and diminished critical power. Relatedly, it seems clear that needs-based justice and ethics must be pluralistic, rather than monistic, as we require (at least) another normative criterion to figure out how needs must be interpreted, which processes of interpretation are just, and how or to what extent needs may be false. Ultimately, this raises the issue of what work needs to be accomplished in order to do justice to such pluralistic accounts, and the challenge of not losing track of needs normatively.

We are left with three challenges for a critical social theory of needs, which may be formulated in the form of dilemmas. *First*, on the question of how to understand needs, there is a dilemma between formal and substantial conceptions. While more formal conceptions of needs would not be contested on a normative level, they would by the same token have no relevant political implications. More substantial conceptions, on the contrary, would allow for dissent and contestation, but might lead to expert discourse paternalism or the naturalization of needs. *Second*, on how to criticize (false) needs, one finds a similar dilemma between relativism and paternalism. On the one hand, more relativist approaches would foster agency by recognizing the autonomy of social agents, but may end up being held up by ideological

blockades that affect the reflexive capacities of those very agents with regards to their needs. On the other hand, more paternalist approaches would be able to criticize ideological blockades, but in so doing they would risk undermining agency and thus capacities of political contestation from below. *Third*, on how to politicize needs, a dilemma between dogmatism and democracy arises. The use of strategic dogmatism may highlight the urgency of certain unsatisfied needs that need to be politically addressed, but it would also tend to grasp those needs as merely given. In contrast, the ideal of democratic deliberation would stress the contingency of existing needs, but might undermine concrete political interventions from above and perhaps also from below. Each of these dilemmas, understood as theoretical and practical challenges for the politics of needs, certainly requires further research and discussion. The Summer School has been, in this sense, a good first step in that direction.

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