

# 11 Theses on Needs

## 1. Needs – the Elephant in the Room

Quite often, needs are the proverbial elephant in the room.

Whether we talk about how to reorganize our ecologically unsustainable way of life, or about the critique of capitalism and its logic that puts profit over people, we make implicit assumptions about needs, especially the needs that the current social order does not meet and does not seem able to meet. Many social movements, too, make needs claims in more or less implicit ways – think of struggles around care work, both paid and unpaid, and how they grew more acute during the pandemic, or struggles around housing and the ways in which a profit-oriented housing market fails to respond to the needs of those who actually live in cities like Berlin.

At the same time, the political strategy to invoke needs is of course not the exclusive domain of progressive movements; appeals to the needs of the members of a community often serve to exclude others, and the backlash against feminist and queer struggles invokes the needs of “true” women and men. As a result, needs are a prominent presence in public debates.

The aura of facticity and naturalness that surrounds needs and that seems to remove them from political contestation, however, calls for further critical-theoretical questioning and reflection.

## 2. Critical Theory and the Critique of Needs

The ambiguity of needs has been an important topic for critical theorists all along: Needs appear both as necessary reference points for the critique of capitalist societies and for an emancipatory politics and as subject to critique and transformation as they are very much shaped by the existing social order and contribute to its reproduction.

Marx’s slogan „To each according to their needs“ posits a radical alternative to the bourgeois fixation on competition in the face of supposedly scarce resources and conflicting interests. The realization of this slogan in communism, however, will not only depend on technological progress, advanced productive forces and the redistribution of social wealth but also and as crucially on a radical transformation of needs. The needs human beings will develop when finally freed from the yoke of exploitation, alienation and ideology will be qualitatively different from their current needs. This second transformation constitutes an even more radical break with liberalism and its emphasis on the givenness of individual needs, desires and preferences.

Critical theory thus calls for a critique and transformation of needs.

## 3. Fundamental Needs: A Dead-End

Critical theory cannot simply assume the category of needs. One does not have to be a historian or cultural anthropologist to realize how extremely variable and moldable human needs are. The need for a car or a smart phone seems both fundamental and highly context-dependent. This makes it impossible to define fundamental or basic needs in any clear and

context-transcendent way, as so many philosophers aspire to do up until today. At the same time, it raises the question whether the invocation of needs can have any critical force in light of their radical historicity and plasticity.

As a result, it remains tempting for any politics of needs to formulate the needs in question in a way that is so general that they cannot be reasonably contested (say, human beings need air and a certain amount of calory intake), but then their social and political implications, their critical potential, will be rather slim. If, on the other hand, the needs in question are formulated in more substantial and thick terms, which gives them critical purchase, then the corresponding needs claims become subject to reasonable dissent and contestation (or give rise to the specter of an authoritarian imposition of needs as defined by experts, philosopher kings, the party...). Nevertheless, from the critical theory perspective, needs only come into view as concrete needs and that means as contested.

#### **4. Needs as Socially Mediated**

In order to see a way out, or rather: around this dilemma, we propose to return to a central insight of early critical theory: needs are never just given, never just natural facts about humans that could be determined objectively. They are not static, but evolve historically, they are not immediate expressions of our nature, but always socially mediated and subject to contested or at least contestable interpretations. They cannot serve as uncontestable anchoring points of social struggles because they are often themselves at the center of political struggles.

Needs are not out there, waiting to be recog-

nized, but they emerge in and through the historical processes of transformation and self-transformation that we “self-interpreting animals” are inescapably involved in.

#### **5. Nature as Contained in Needs**

That needs are irreducibly social insofar as they are never accessible independently from their socially mediated manifestation in concrete historical circumstances does not mean that needs are merely social and infinitely malleable. As Horkheimer puts it, both the social order and the fat content are part of the milk children are said to need.

We can therefore say, with Adorno: Nature is contained within the social category of need. This irreducible – and irreducibly – natural side to needs cannot be set aside lest the politics of needs slide into voluntarism and socio-technocratic manipulation.

#### **6. False Needs**

Beyond narrowly cognitivist understandings of ideology in terms of false consciousness, “false needs” point to the complex mechanisms that tie people to the status quo: false or distorted affects, attachments, and needs play a crucial role in making us into the well-functioning and -integrated subjects that we mostly are. This is no surprise: our needs are formed under conditions of exploitation, competition, patriarchy and racism, ensuring that a sufficiently large number of people remain attached to those conditions because the current order promises to fulfill their needs and actually seems to do so, even if promises of social mobility and happiness increasingly ring hollow.

As it becomes more and more clear even to those who continue to benefit from the existing capitalist “system of needs”, the satisfaction of needs under capitalism – under the conditions of class-, gender- and race-based domination and exploitation – is always the satisfaction of the needs of some at the expense of the needs of others, at the expense of those populations whose needs do not count, to whom one can remain indifferent, or whose suffering may even become part of the content of one’s perceived needs (as in the case of sexism and racism).

Because needs can be false and distorted, they need to be criticized and transformed.

## **7. The Formation of Needs**

But how can we actually criticize needs and transform them? Any answer to this challenge has to avoid two untenable positions: to either naturalize needs, and treat them as given, or to determine needs by fiat (usually “from above”). While critical theory is no stranger to both temptations, it also offers a way to avoid this dilemma. As Nancy Fraser argues, we should shift our focus from the critique of false needs in substantial terms to the critique of the conditions under which needs are generated, articulated, interpreted, satisfied, and frustrated, i.e. to the critique of the processes of social and political mediation and formation needs are always subject to.

The critique of needs should therefore primarily take the form of a critique of the formation of needs under specific social conditions, and this means primarily: a critique of the many ways in which the formation of needs is asymmetrical, oppressive, authoritarian, monological, top-down, one-dimensional.

In return, enabling the free and equal parti-

cipation of people in collective processes of need formation, articulation, interpretation and satisfaction is a much more adequate aim for critical theory than writing up lists of presumably basic human needs and call for their satisfaction.

## **8. Needs Beyond Needs**

The horizon of need satisfaction is itself a distortion that orients wishes, desires, and social phantasies towards given necessities, social control, and normalization. Adorno said in his famous Theses on Need: “It is inconceivable that the compulsion to satisfy needs should continue to exist as a fetter on productive force in classless society.” Overcoming need orientation in this specific sense which does not deny their urgency, would mean to allow queer desires to not only persist and develop but also – possibly – to gain space and influence in society and change social relations or even whole forms of contemporary life. The neoliberal plurality of preferences shares with the Sixties’ appeal to liberation the credo that all wants have an equal claim to satisfaction. The critique of needs, however, makes clear that not all claims to satisfaction are equally justified. Desire may be notoriously polymorphous, proliferating, and deviant but it is socially mediated and susceptible to manipulation. Desires are therefore a legitimate object of non-normalizing critique, especially when their satisfaction comes at the expense of others or produces individual or social harm.

## **9. The Politics of Needs**

The critique of needs interrogates the conditions under which needs are formed – interpreted, articulated, ascribed, contested and

transformed – in light of a critical politics of need interpretation. This politics of needs can therefore neither simply prescribe nor proscribe needs. Rather, its modus operandi is negativist and antagonistic. False naturalizations of needs that insulate them from contestation stand in the way of such a politics as do asymmetric power relations, distorted vocabularies for speaking about needs, lists of presumably basic needs, or socio-technological need manipulations. The injustice of socially produced “organized abandonment” (Ruth Wilson Gilmore), in which entire populations are excluded from the possibility of generating, articulating and claiming needs, can be read as exclusion from participation in precisely this social process of collective needs formation. The critique of needs has to move beyond needs.

## 10. An Emancipatory Politics of Needs

An emancipatory politics of needs does not start from needs that are taken to be pre-political – rather, it politicizes needs and subjects them to a process of political formation, articulation and contestation that is itself transformative and aims at overcoming existing forms of domination and exploitation. “Radical needs” (Agnes Heller) that arise within capitalism but have a system-transforming potential – the need for solidarity, the need for free time, ... – can be a starting point and driving force of such a politics but will again and by necessity lead us beyond needs (as we know them).

## 11. “To each according to *their* needs”

Marx’s slogan “To each according to *their* needs” therefore calls not only for an egali-

tarian reorganization of the satisfaction of needs but also for a radical-democratic politics of needs that centers on the free and equal participation of all in processes of needs formation.

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