

Theses on the Critique of Needs – Rereading Adorno

by Stefan Etgeton

1. »The need in contradiction with itself«¹ – *hedonistic ember core of critique*

Any non-puritanical critique of needs would be in solidarity with pleasures and lusts. The concern that arises from the bourgeois ideal of moderation that people could fare too well is alien to such a critique. Uncovering the frustration inherent in escapist satisfactions, this perspective proves to be deeply hedonistic. The critique of needs should therefore begin by unfolding the contradictions within the dynamics of needs: in order to analyse *needs* that defraud *the need* and counteract its satisfaction – not in the sense of a distinction between surface (of needs) and depth (of the need), but as a critical reconstruction of these escape and displacement processes² in the social context. It is about a genealogy of “enmity

1 „Die gesellschaftliche Vermittlung des Bedürfnisses – als Vermittlung durch die kapitalistische Gesellschaft – hat einen Punkt erreicht, wo das Bedürfnis in Widerspruch mit sich selbst gerät. Daran, und nicht an irgendeine vorgegebene Hierarchie von Werten und Bedürfnissen, hat die Kritik anzuknüpfen.“ (Theodor W. Adorno: Soziologische Schriften I; Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. 8 [Hrsg.: Rolf Tiedemann]; Frankfurt a.M. 1972; S. 393)

2 „Jene Bedürfnisse sind die Male eines Zustandes, der seine Opfer zur Flucht zwingt und zugleich so fest in der Gewalt hält, daß die Flucht stets in die krampfhaftige Wiederholung des Zustandes ausartet, vor dem geflohen wird. An den sogenannten Oberflächenbedürfnissen ist das Schlechte nicht ihre Oberflächlichkeit, deren Begriff den selber fragwürdigen der Innerlichkeit voraussetzt. Sondern schlecht ist an diesen Bedürfnissen – die gar keine sind –, daß sie auf eine Erfüllung sich richten, die sie um eben diese Erfüllung zugleich betrügt.“ (ebd. S. 392)

to pleasure in pleasure”³ for the sake of pleasure.

2. »The guilt of life can no longer be reconciled with life«⁴ – *planetary consumption*

The dark side of hedonism is the egomaniacal tyranny of an immediate need satisfaction focused on the here and now. The failure of those societies that still dominate the world to meet their own standards is not just a matter of ideals. As concrete as the non-needed needs are consuming the planet’s finite resources (not to mention the fate of the animals that are reified in food production), so real is the hunger of those who are starving at the end of the global food chain and who are barely able to survive. The dilemma according to which the satisfaction of our needs, even our necessary needs, deprives them and all other living beings of their planetary basis of existence even before they are born, can hardly be resolved morally, but it has to be negotiated socially as well as politically and therefore wrest from everyday suppression. Hedonism as a motive for the critique of needs therefore necessarily goes along with a concept of global trans-generational responsibility for people, animals and nature.

3 „Genussfeindschaft im Genuss“ (Theodor W. Adorno: Über den Fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens, in: Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, Jahrgang 7, 1938 [Hrsg.: Max Horkheimer]; Paris 1939; S. 325)

4 „Die Schuld des Lebens, das als pures Faktum bereits anderem Leben den Atem raubt, einer Statistik gemäß, die eine überwältigende Zahl Ermordeter durch eine minimal Geretteter ergänzt, wie wenn das von der Wahrscheinlichkeitsrechnung vorgesehen wäre, ist mit dem Leben nicht mehr zu versöhnen. Jene Schuld reproduziert sich unablässig, weil sie dem Bewußtsein in keinem Augenblick ganz gegenwärtig sein kann. Das, nichts anderes zwingt zur Philosophie.“ (Theodor W. Adorno: Negative Dialektik; Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. 6 [Hrsg.: Rolf Tiedemann]; Frankfurt a.M. 1970; S. 357)

3. »In truth, second nature is first [nature]«⁵ – *fossil need structures*

In view of the necessary transformation in the areas of mobility, energy or food the increasing petrification of needs, which makes a mockery of people's concrete need and even more of their interests, is paralysing. It does not stem solely from the inertia of the psychic apparatus in response to social requirements. Persisting in what in the short term is perceived as advantageous is the reflex of a kind of self-preservation that comes into conflict with itself the more it develops to be manic. The predominant mode of socialisation thus remains entrenched in the natural conditions, sabotaging what it purports to achieve: the survival, prosperity and unfolding of *humanity* as a species and aspiration. The hypostatisation of needs, as they happen to be now, prevents mankind from pushing open the gates to what should actually be called "human history" and throws it back to a stage of second, and thus as well first nature.

4. »Impenetrability of real and false need«⁶ – *epistemic humbleness*

The fact that under the prevailing conditions the socialisation of individuals links reproduction with repression means that a careful, even minimally invasive approach is absolutely necessary when dissecting and untangling

5 „Es ist in Wahrheit die zweite Natur die erste.“ (Theodor W. Adorno: Philosophische Frühschriften; Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. 1 [Hrsg.: Rolf Tiedemann]; Frankfurt a.M. 1973; S. 365)

6 „Die Undurchdringlichkeit von echtem und falschem Bedürfnis gehört wesentlich zu der Klassenherrschaft. In ihr bilden die Reproduktion des Lebens und dessen Unterdrückung eine Einheit, dessen Gesetz zwar im Ganzen durchschaubar, deren Einzelgestalt jedoch selber undurchdringlich ist.“ Theodor W. Adorno: Soziologische Schriften I; Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. 8 [Hrsg.: Rolf Tiedemann]; Frankfurt a.M. 1972; S. 394

the needs interwoven with the status quo. The insight into which and how (false) needs cover other (true) needs, shift them and push them into frustration in order to extinguish them or numb the longing for them is by no means apparent at first glance, but requires sensitive analysis and self-critical reflection. Depending on the social context and individual situation, the weights within the balance between necessary renunciation and immediate pleasure gain can change fundamentally. Critique of needs must be equipped with a sharpened sense of ambiguity in order to endure and critically deal with the ambiguous indistinguishability of truth and deception in the need itself.

5. »Expropriation of the unconscious by social control«⁷ – *identity as a trademark*

The medial fetishisation of goods corresponds to a regressive consumption and consumer behaviour. Consumer researchers describe the 20th century as a period of "increasing self-coding by people through and even as brands"⁸. The goods of longing manufactured by the media function as substitutes for an abstract idea of meaningfulness. They seep subcutaneously into the subconscious of human beings, where they colonize their imaginary worlds and occupy their desires. Products that function as emblems of self-presentation and social distinction, that have already come into the world as commodity fetishes, succeed in temporarily plugging those gaps in coherence, which the production and service processes,

7 Theodor W. Adorno: Soziologische Schriften I; Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. 8 [Hrsg.: Rolf Tiedemann]; Frankfurt a.M. 1972; S. 431

8 Alexander Schug: Werbung und die Kultur des Kapitalismus; in: Die Konsumgesellschaft in Deutschland 1890-1990 - Ein Handbuch (Hrsg.: Heinz-Gerhard Haupt und Claudius Torp); Frankfurt a.M. 2009; S. 360

dissected by the division of labour, ripped into the mental balance of people. Identities, even the deviant ones, harden like the needs they inspire and ratify the erosion of subject identity driven by the culture industry.

6. »Even in the false need something of freedom stirs«⁹ – *dialectical abutments*

The false need is more than just the distracting and pushing away substitute for the true one, it can also be read as a symptom of a buried desire. Just as good art “loosens the tongue of kitsch, releases the longing that commerce, which kitsch serves, merely exploits”¹⁰, so insightful critique could burst those special affectations and tender temptations most vulnerable to exploitation from their escapist frame and make them speak. As with Benjamin’s frills, the ephemeral desires for momentary distraction deserve special attention. Inspected critically in detail, it is important to unfold the inner and outer dialectics of false

needs and to use them for a better understanding of the present, even in those cases, in which they – in their shabby banality – appear to be irretrievable. As long as they do not get lost in the rat race of consumerist pseudo-activities, with a bit of luck, delicate impulses of hedonistic rebellion can escape through the fine hairline cracks in the shell of total integration. Even *radical needs* may arise from this.

Berlin, Palm Sunday 2nd April 2023

9 „Die lebendigen Menschen, noch die zurückgebliebensten und konventionell befangensten, haben ein Recht auf die Erfüllung ihrer sei’s auch falschen Bedürfnisse. Setzt der Gedanke an das wahre, objektive Bedürfnis sich rücksichtslos über das subjektive hinweg, so schlägt er, wie von je die *volonté générale* gegen die *volonté de tous*, in brutale Unterdrückung um. Sogar im falschen Bedürfnis der Lebendigen regt sich etwas von Freiheit; das, was die ökonomische Theorie einmal Gebrauchswert gegenüber dem abstrakten Tauschwert nannte.“ (Theodor W. Adorno: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft; Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. 10 [Hrsg.: Rolf Tiedemann]; Frankfurt a.M. 1977; S. 390)

10 „Jede Mahlersche Symphonie fragt, wie aus den Trümmern der musikalischen Dingwelt lebendige Totalität werden kann. Nicht trotz des Kitschs, zu dem sie sich neigt, ist Mahlers Musik groß, sondern indem ihre Konstruktion dem Kitsch die Zunge löst, die Sehnsucht entbindet, welche der Kommerz bloß ausbeutet, dem der Kitsch dient. Der Verlauf von Mahlers symphonischen Sätzen entwirft Rettung kraft der Entmenschlichung.“ (Theodor W. Adorno: Mahler. Eine musikalische Physiognomik; Frankfurt a.M. 1960; S. 59)