

being human is being needy

3 more theses on needs

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The 11 theses on needs, which play on Adorno's theses on needs, essentially argue that no stable concept of needs can be found or created. Instead, needs are malleable. They are one of the most variable of all the critical social categories formed by the Frankfurt School and their ever changing nature undermines any attempt to determine their specific content beyond the immediate present.

Nevertheless, considering particularly the types of crises that concern the distribution of resources in a world of human bodies, dealing with a changing climate and agriculture, needs are, as always, concrete and at the same time, structurally conditioned through the time and place in which they manifest.

Needs are malleable but not flexible. They often appear in institutionalized form. Needs can be the result of social orientations and there are social practices, even individual ones, that are capable of disrupting a certain order of needs by offering a different way to live and, by extension, a different conditioning of said needs.

1

Needs are conceptually deployed to separate culture from nature and civilization from the not quite human. In the first of his eight theses on needs, Adorno immediately distinguishes between the needs of the civilized and the needs of savage. Whereas, as he explains, mere hunger can be satisfied “with grasshoppers

and gnat-cakes”, the civilized need more than this: “They must get something to eat which they do not find disgusting”.¹ Their hunger is remarkably marked as “concrete” by Adorno by which he intends to say that it is not any hunger, not a raw necessity that is articulated in order for the human creature to stay alive, but a culturally transmitted, yet still necessary and non-negotiable hunger for the specific objects, which the civilized see themselves able to consume. The conditioning of this specific form of consumption aims to guard itself from the risk of compromising civilization itself – or the chance to participate in it. Needs, in their historically concrete malleability, seem to be relevant not only for questions of redistribution and life forms but also for bigger and less innocent categorizations of what constitutes a human and what a mere creaturely need and how they each yearn for satisfaction.

Adorno thinks that needs are malleable to their very core, but their articulation and satisfaction is not. Needs are historically formed and concretely sedimented in affects of disgust, and disgust constitutes an insurmountable obstacle to the satisfaction of needs by anything else but their historically concrete object. This obstacle-affect is being read by Adorno as a borderline between culture and nature.

But it would be misled to focus on the feeling of disgust in order to truly understand the formation of needs. Instead, disgust could be considered as one specific and particularly complex articulation of need. Being disgusted means to be needy and to hate oneself for it. Being disgusted implies to face the choice between starvation and cultural compromise and – even though Adorno does not engage with it extensively – to proof one's humanity

1 Adorno 1942

through affective resistance towards the fact that one is after all reducible to the state of a creature [Kreatürlichkeit]. To be disgusted translates to a feeling in which the possibility to renounce the preservation of life by any means becomes graspable. And even if one chooses to literally suck it up, disgust reassures the human subject that its life is more than physical survival.

Yet, there is always the question how disgust manifests, and in what place and at what time. To whom does it function as an insurance of their own humanity? And what happens if that feeling, that affective cultural reflex is no longer present because the boundary that stabilizes it has been crossed too many times? To think about disgust as a transgression of human features that are second nature presupposes a culture of how to satisfy them. What are needs beyond the worry about the integrity of such a culture?

Adorno acknowledges the problem of distinction, when he explains the formation of needs to large parts as a result of class relations: “On the other hand it must recognise that currently existing needs themselves are, in their present form, the product of class society. Humanity cannot be neatly separated from the consequences of repression [Repressionsfolge] by [our understanding of] any ‘need.’”²

There is no way to know whether a particular utterance of a need corresponds to the deeply human character of the body it stems from or whether it is the result of the ongoing harmful treatment of this body by social forces.

2

While critical theory has well understood how the formation of needs is the result of a dialectic between social conditions and the bo-

dies who live under them, it only offers a very abstract answer to the question what happens with (our) needs when these social conditions have been rearranged. The answer Adorno and others hint towards is that under these new circumstances, needs *will* indeed be satisfied, or at least they will no longer manifest as lack, which is how they tend to articulate themselves under capitalism. But even if needs will no longer occur as visible forms of social neglect, there will always be less visible, less obvious, and often even unconscious needs which will slowly start to form and make demands, because they can and they have to. As long as there are subjects who are “identified by society in terms of the care [they] need[ed]”,³ subjects who, because of the fact that their needs could never, not even a little bit, be met by the offers capitalist societies make, needs are seen as and manifest as infinite. Needs are scalable and care can always be better than it is. The ends of needs are definitely beyond imagination under conditions of capitalism and even if they become attainable in a different society, chance is, that nothing is ever going to be perfect: „Care is *always* a deficit, access is *always* insolvent—and that’s the point. This is because the body, by definition, is a thing that needs support—it needs food, rest, sleep, shelter, care. I like to truncate this definition, to make the body simply a thing that needs, period, because what else would support be—but needed? The body’s dependency *is* its ontology: it cannot survive alone unto itself, even if it wanted to.”⁴ Johanna Hedva describes the perfidious capitalist dynamics by referring to their own body as “a body that needed more than it was supposed to need”.⁵ Anti-ableist theorizing has clarified how capitalism builds

³ Hedva 2022

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

² Adorno 1942

on ableist ideologies and modulates bodies in a way which makes them appear as either fully self sufficient, preferably, – or entirely dysfunctional.⁶ What an end of capitalism could bring about though, is to no longer see eternal neediness as “abnormal, disgraceful, an index of one’s inadequacy.”⁷

Needs are infinite. Once admitted, outspoken, named, needs do not stop to escalate in dimension and detail. They have no sense of modesty, their very nature is to be insatiable. Once you ask an emancipated human being what they need, it is likely that they will never stop. To be needy marks the end of repression, the end of individual responsibility for getting along with what is.⁸ The more freedom, the more needs occur because shame, constrained access and fear are removed from their formation. This open-ended neediness is one way to understand the realization of “being human as practice”⁹ (Wynter) while it is also an objection to any universal idea of satisfaction or the assumption that, with evolving needs, anyone can ever be satisfied at all. Satisfaction demands more than just material redistribution.

3

When a catastrophe happens, needs unambiguously take form. Needs oscillate between means and ends and the attempt to theorize them means to take on the challenge of a shaking ground. The devastating recent earthquakes in Syria, Turkey and the Kurdish regions demonstrate a total unambiguosness regarding the shape of needs as it is suffering people who are likeliest to know exactly

what they need. This is how needs *can* “serve as uncontested anchoring points of social struggles”¹⁰. Catastrophes long and short are materially concrete and urgent sites of need-constitution. They do not only occur as fate-like big scale events but often they are the result of human made processes of destruction and carelessness. Often, political struggles in the name of needs evolve as a reaction to these kinds of systematic neglect. The Black Panther Party’s freedom struggle, for example, assumed a radical form in order to decisively push back against the ignorance of people’s needs and to make them count as such in the first place. In this case, deprivation and neglect as well as killing and harming of Black people amount to a catastrophe of several centuries, called racism. Needs occur because of that harm and the harm continues when needs are constantly being contested and denied by the ruling class.

How can the act of naming and making explicit everything we do know about needs at a particular moment help to think about the concept as such, since, as has been stated, “needs only come into view as concrete needs and that means as contested.”¹¹ Adorno emphasizes the socially determined but also ontologically troubled character of needs when he approaches the concept by thinking about its counterpart: satisfaction. “that no-one shall go hungry any more.”¹² is half a sentence articulating the means and ends of any critical engagement with material distribution. It is an image of satisfaction, which suggests that there might be a necessary end to the contestation of needs, a universal aspiration for their satisfaction in order to understand what they are. In its simplicity, “that no-one shall go hungry any more” is close to the catastrophic articulation of

6 Jenkins 2021

7 Hedva 2022

8 This thought occurred in a conversation I had with Christopher Weickenmeier.

9 McKittrick 2015

10 Celikates et al. 2023

11 Celikates et al. 2023

12 P.156, Adorno 2005

needs. It tends to needs in their most concrete form, in the absence of discourse.

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