

Saving the Needs

by Luca Hemmerich, Christoph Henning,
Dirk Jörke, and Katharina Liesenberg

In critical theory, needs have been an important concept going back to Rousseau and Marx. They are often – explicitly or implicitly – appealed to by social movements, political parties, and other social actors. In a programmatic essay, representatives of contemporary German critical theory have articulated *11 Theses on Needs*, calling for a critical reflection of the concept. While we agree with some of their points, we believe that their negativistic approach is insufficient and that they brush aside more naturalistic views too quickly. In this reply, we briefly sketch an alternative way to think about needs.

1

Needs are something we share with non-human animals and even plants. When talking about the needs of a dog, for example, we presuppose characteristic traits typical of dogs upon which these needs are grounded. But of course, in the case of human beings, this is more complicated than in the case of non-human animals.

2

We agree that *human* needs have an irreducibly social dimension. It is important to spell out in precisely what ways human needs are socially mediated. There seem to be four of these ways: First, human needs are *expressed* in different ways under different social conditions. The language we use shapes the way we

interpret and fulfil (or postpone) our needs. Second, the *satisfaction* of needs depends on social structures which change over time. Third, the way we *think and learn* about our needs is socially conditioned. Fourth, *to the limited but real degree that human nature itself is subject to change* (like, for example, *historical changes in human anatomy*), the needs arising from it can also change.

3

However, in our view, neither of those claims about the social mediation of needs imply that (i) human beings do not have fundamental needs, or that (ii) we cannot fallibly but positively identify some of those fundamental needs. The authors seem to think that the natural and social dimension of needs cannot be analytically separated. But once we distinguish between the different levels of abstraction, it becomes possible to disentangle fundamental needs (like those for food, shelter, health, and safety; for freedom, communication, meaningful activity, friendship, and community, for example) from the different, socially specific ways to express and fulfil them. The historical variety concerns the particular historical form of needs – the needed food can come as North Chinese or South Indian food, in vegetarian, vegan, or paleo variety. But at the fundamental level they all cater to the indispensable need for food. The same holds for talking drums, newspapers, and the iPhone 13 – they cater to the same need: communication. And so on.

4

In the third thesis, the authors seem to admit that this distinction is possible as they claim that demands for general needs would be

meaningless and politically empty. This forgets that hunger, civil war, destitution, eviction, and diseases are very real in many places: It is far from meaningless to demand that everybody's fundamental needs should be met, whoever you are and wherever you live. To give this up means to give up a lot.

5

It is not clear to us if, and in what way, the authors distinguish between *needs* on the one hand and *desires or preferences* on the other hand. In thesis 8, for instance, they speak of needs, preferences, wants, and desires in one breath. But the distinction between needs and preferences is important in two ways. First, if we do not distinguish between needs and preferences, it becomes unclear why we should appeal to the concept of needs at all. Second, from a critical perspective, it is essential to insist that *preferences* are not given but socially formed, and that they can be adaptive to dire circumstances or manipulation. Authors like Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have called attention to this fact many times. However, as Nussbaum shows, claiming that *preferences* can be adaptive is compatible with drawing up a list of basic human capabilities and needs.

6

Fundamental human needs appear to be far less malleable and adaptive than preferences. As evidence for the contrary claim, i.e., that one cannot define basic human needs "in any clear or context-transcendent way", the authors appeal to the need for a car as something that "seems both fundamental and highly context-dependent". To us, this need (or, rather, preference with underlying needs) does

not look fundamental at all. On the contrary, it is crucial and illuminating for critical theory to ask which fundamental needs may underlie the desire to possess a car: for example, the need for mobility or the need for social recognition – fundamental needs that are expressed and satisfied in very different ways depending on the social context. This may enable us to ask if those fundamental needs can potentially be satisfied in other ways that are, for instance, less ecologically destructive, dangerous, and atomistic than current social structures, which compel many people to own and drive a car, allow for.

7

We believe that the fallible endeavour of trying to identify basic needs may be worthwhile for critical theory in the following respects: As indicated above, fundamental human needs can serve as a basis for (i) *criticizing certain preferences* while at the same time (ii) *explaining* them in terms of more fundamental needs and (iii) pointing to *alternative ways of realisation* of those needs. More importantly, we can also (iv) *criticize social relations* on the basis of needs. In doing so, we can (v) *account for the standards* of our critique, (vi) *identify the structures* that block the satisfaction of basic needs, and (vii) tentatively *indicate the direction* in which these structures should be transformed. Finally, in couching social critique in terms of needs, (viii) *we speak the same language* as social actors and movements that protest against the thwarting of their needs.

8

The authors worry that such an approach could lead to an authoritarian imposition of needs. Yet, a basic needs approach need not

have authoritarian implications, and it may mean taking real social actors and their concerns *more* rather than less seriously. When actors appeal to basic needs in social struggles, we think that critical theory should support these appeals rather than criticize and move beyond them. Critical theory, in our view, should interact with social movements and other social actors *in terms of their own substantive concerns*, rather than recommend – from a distance – procedures under which actors should figure things out for themselves. That does not mean that we always share those concerns, but we might – as in the case of the Gilets jaunes – look for alternative solutions together (like better public transport rather than subsidised petrol). When we listen to these concerns and demands and take them seriously, we can avoid the looming spectre of authoritarianism. Such an approach would not only contribute to a critical theory closely interacting with its addressees, but also propose substantive answers to opponents of emancipatory politics.

9

At the end, the authors call for “a radical democratic politics of needs”. This is a demand that is as agreeable as it is abstract. A critical theory should instead point out concrete ways that lead to an improvement in the well-being of the people, for example, by advocating an egalitarian school system or policies of redistribution. In other words, emancipatory politics requires the – of course, always only temporary – institutionalisation of channels of social change. This can be achieved, first, by formulating human rights that are as concrete as possible, and which often rely on corresponding needs; and second, by showing democratic ways of shaping politics that do not lead to new exclusions.

10

Although contentious, a naturalistic approach like the one we propose has always been part of critical theory. A strong naturalistic thread runs through Marx’s writings, who repeatedly appeals to human nature in grounding basic human needs. The same holds for Marcuse, Fromm, even Habermas (in 2001); for Dewey, Freud, Chomsky, and many feminist materialists. Such a naturalistic point of view is an essential part of the conversation about needs in critical theory and should not be excluded.

11

A critical theory must be a practical philosophy. It must foster social change. We live in a world in which the fundamental needs of billions of human and non-human beings are unmet, and this will worsen in the future. Our central task as critical theorists is to identify, explain, and help to transform the social structures that continually (re)produce this situation.