

A Politics of Needs based on Habermas and Marcuse – A Response to the 11 Theses on Needs

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The term “need” is a central category of political debate. Needs have been at the centre of the concept of sustainability since its definition in the Brundtland Report, they are called on when it comes to poverty reduction and social security, and they form the backbone of any conception of a better life or an alternative economy. In view of the theoretical and political significance of this term, it is therefore to be welcomed that Robin Celikates, Rahel Jaeggi, Daniel Loick and Christian Schmidt take stock in 11 theses and accept the challenge of developing a “politics of need”.

In their defence of the social constructedness and the essential political controversiality of needs, the 11 theses reach a conclusion that refers primarily to anti-domestic structural changes. The discussion on what needs actually are comes up a little short. According to the theses, one can only advocate the creation of conditions for the “free and equal participation of all in processes of needs formation” (thesis 11), but not for concrete definitions of needs or the evocation of true needs. Even an escape into the abstract via general lists of needs, such as Martha Nussbaum’s, does not help. A politics “beyond needs” thus means advocating structural changes in the system of domination that can ensure that legitimate need formation takes place. This is in any respect a theoretically highly acceptable and

also politically justifiable way.

And as much as one must welcome the recourse to an intersubjective and political determination of needs instead of proceeding from objectively identifiable needs or, vice versa, deviating into a subjective arbitrariness of perceived needs, a preliminary question remains unanswered: Why are needs such a politically favoured and at the same time controversial category? Why are needs brought into the field, although we have known for a long time about their non-objectivity, their not being given and not being natural, but their being shaped by power formations, and their irrevocable mixing of sociality and naturalness?

There is a political demand to use the category need. Need, despite all the knowledge of its non-fixity, operates as an authority. Whatever can be called need has a higher authority than that which only comes across as will or preference. When one refers to need, one precisely does not want to act in the interest-bound opposition of individual or group preferences, but to refer to something that has a higher dignity. Need is a superior instance of justification. Therefore, efforts to emphasise the sociality, variability and politicisation of needs, in continuation of Nancy Fraser’s reflections, are ultimately unattractive for radical politics. By defining needs as fundamentally socially mediated, a radical politics of needs ultimately loses its justificatory authority. It is deprived of its ‘ground’. Needs deprived of their legitimacy no longer fulfil their role in the political debate. Ultimately, the (accurate) social constructionist view of needs ruins the political power of the concept.

Therefore, an integrative conception with a “Habermas part” and a “Marcuse part” will be proposed here in order to find a way for critical theory to accompany, guide and inform a

politics of needs.

1.

If one does not want to simply emphasise the controversial nature of needs and indulge in the defence of naturalisations of needs or a philosopher's supremacy and their talk of 'true' needs, one will - as long as the conditions are not completely overturned - have to follow the democratic process of the political determination of needs. This means taking a procedural path in the sense of Jürgen Habermas and recognising as a need only that which can claim legitimate validity as the result of a societal decision-making process under conditions of general opportunities for participation and a fair procedure. Needs are then those wishes or preferences that have survived this process of public discussion and political collective decision-making. Needs are then not the grounds for political demands, but the result of political processes aimed at determining what is really necessary for everyone in this society at this point in time. This path ensures that the concept of need has its own authority, only it is not an original, given or easily accessible authority, it is an authority bestowed in a politically conflictual process, of course always contestable and questionable anew. But it is still an authority: it is no longer a matter of subjective desires or egoistic interests, but of politically decided standardisations of what is necessary in the respective time and society.

2.

But this path cannot be the only contribution that critical theory can and should make to a politics of needs. For another element that constitutes the need for a theory of needs is not yet fulfilled, the intuition that there is something that is really needed by all, that lays

a kind of foundation in us for the legitimacy of wanting. There must be something that guarantees legitimate willing in us, something that represents a kind of rationality of the individual's will despite all subject constitution through class, gender and race relations. This is the path advocated by Herbert Marcuse in a conversation with Jürgen Habermas in July 1977:¹ Marcuse here uses the Hegelian concept of the "system of needs" for the transformation of the entire personality structure of people, whereupon Habermas points out to him that Hegel had only understood civil and bourgeois society by this. Marcuse, however, rejects this as a narrowing and points out that he always understands the revolutionisation of bourgeois society and economy to mean at the same time the self-production of a new human being, because this is precisely the meaning of the revolution, not just the restructuring of the economy in the narrower sense and the disempowerment of a class. The emphasis on revolutionising the structure of the personality and the economy, however, is only the introduction to a more far-reaching theme: What is the role of reason and rationality in social development? In his remarks, Habermas energetically honed the difference between his and Marcuse's view: he himself held the view that reason was located in language and the general unconstrained formation of wills, i.e. in institutions, forms of intersubjectivity. In Marcuse's view, on the other hand, it seems to be the drive nature in which reason is founded, so that rationality is thus laid out far more deeply, which leads to a naturalistic justification of reason.

Marcuse agrees with this diagnosis and states: "We can only form a general will on the basis

¹ Habermas, Jürgen, Bovenschen, Silvia u.a.: *Gespräche mit Herbert Marcuse*, Frankfurt a.M. 1978, 9-62.

of reason and never vice versa, and reason or reasonableness is indeed in the drives, namely in the urge of erotic energy to stop destruction. This is precisely what I would define as reason: Protection of life, enrichment of life, beautification of life. And that, according to Freud, is inherent in the drive structure itself.”² Habermas, on the other hand, insists that there are disputes and arguments about exactly what “beautification” means in a concrete situation, for example, and that therefore only procedures can guarantee the reasonableness of a solution. Herbert Marcuse negates this by pointing out that everyone knows what is more beautiful and less beautiful; one knows what a better life is: “If someone does not yet know what a better life is, he is hopeless.”³ It is the presumption of something unavailable, of an impulse to feel what is necessary and good for one’s own person, what constitutes a human being and what does not, despite all deformation. This should not be hastily dismissed as naturalisation, even if the concept of drive is no longer a sufficient scientific vocabulary. What is claimed as the reason for the legitimacy of a will can just as well be thought of as the interweaving of sociality and naturalness, as a bodily experience of social events, half articulated, half merely felt, that something is not good but wrong, that it has a profoundly damaging effect. It is perhaps no more than the assumption that human nature-sociality cannot be entirely manipulated and transformed, that there is always a minus somewhere when everything is externally shaped.

This basis of reason may be reflected in experiences that are perceived as fundamental negative events. These negative experiences

2 Marcuse in Habermas/Bovenschen u.a. 1978, 32 (own translation).

3 Marcuse in Habermas/Bovenschen u.a. 1978, 30 (own translation).

are the material of discourses on an adequate political determination of needs in order to gain an idea of what is necessary and needed in a certain time and society. The mere naming of needs leads too quickly to arbitrariness, to subjective wanting without authentication by an authority we can trust. What is needed, therefore, is the distinction of certain contributions to the discourse on needs. And these are narratives of fundamental negative experiences. What is experienced as fundamentally negative needs to be told in order to be transformed from a subjective to an intersubjectively shareable story. It is the accounts of what is experienced that function as an - albeit always only potential - instance of authentication in the general social space. This is not a call for exuberant subjectivity and questioning of what is experienced and felt, not a standpoint theory or assurance of a veto position. Narratives of negative experiences, even if very basic, can also lead to different conclusions about what is necessary. These negative experiences, too, can only be given universal validity in mutual debate; they, too, are not final authorities, but voices that are to form the starting point and the substance of what finally enters into the political determination of needs.

3.

Critical theory must link up with the experiences of the individual and not completely take the side of the structures and procedures, but rather take the socially determined in the subject as the essential starting point, because it is a matter of experiences of hardship and suffering, of harm and non-recognition. These form the starting point of a politics of needs, but they are not at the same time its result and end point. The many narratives correct and modify each other mutually and

form the authentication potential of a reference to the subject. So much for the Marcuse part of the assumption of a basal reasonableness in the individual. As such, narratives enter into the political discourses and decisions about what is socially recognised as a need. They form the starting point of the processes that constitute the Habermas part of a politics of needs. Without wanting to appear too harmonistic, a politics of needs could benefit from such a theoretical connection.