

## For a Sociology of Needs

By Rafael Alvear

In their 11 Theses on Needs, leading representatives of German Critical Theory have highlighted the importance of revisiting the problem of “needs.” Early Critical Theorists reflected extensively on this concept, with one focus being a critique of the way needs developed during the capitalist era. In Adorno’s *Thesen über Bedürfnis*, in Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, and in Horkheimer’s *Zum Problem der Bedürfnisse* a clear contradiction is observed between the increasing technical possibilities for the satisfaction of needs and the factual dissatisfaction of these needs amid late capitalism. To put it in Marcuse’s words (2007[1964]: 10), this is a contradiction “between the given and the possible”—a problematic gap that, as the young Ágnes Heller also observed in *The Theory of Need* in Marx, must urgently be addressed. In the search to problematize some elements involved in this contradiction, I will expose 1. the problem of the alienation of needs under the dominance of the neoliberal performance principle, and then 2. the way in which this principle manifests itself not only in the economy but in the diversity of social spheres. At the end, I conclude with a critical plea for a sociology of needs that aims to take alienation existing in a plurality of social spheres into account.

### 1. Neoliberal Performance and Alienation of Needs

The—for some explicit, for others more in-

direct—connection between the theoretical perspectives mentioned above and Marx—the “great thinker” on needs, as claimed by Heller (1976)—underlines the continued relevance of Marx’s theory. His work does not only observe the extreme need of the proletarian masses, but also highlights the possibility for revolutionizing the status quo in order to close the gap between what is socially established and what is socially possible. “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!” Marx (1969: 21) exclaimed in his famous *Kritik des Gothaer Programms*. This principle, which was to characterize the organizational core of the coming communist society, differs fundamentally from the guiding principle realized by real-world socialism in the Soviet Union, which read: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his performance [Leistung]” (Stalin *Verfassung* 1936).

Regardless of this historical-conceptual contradiction, the performance principle of Soviet Realsozialismus reminds us of the most radical form of neoliberalism, which began to be imposed by fire and blood in Chile 50 years ago. Here, the subjugation of needs is explicit: in a society that is subjected to such a performance principle and in which simultaneously growth is beginning to be proclaimed as the primary goal of all economic activity, the satisfaction of needs takes a back seat. Instead, the ideological background of society oriented—consciously and unconsciously—each individual’s performance toward said growth. And so it was that even after the demise of the military dictatorship, Ricardo Lagos, the first socialist president of Chile after Salvador Allende, crowned the appropriation of that commandment in all its magnitude: “The main task”, which should guide political and econo-

mic performance, “is to grow; everything else is music.” We find a similar sentiment expressed by Angela Merkel’s statement at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that Germany “needs, above all, three things: first: growth, second: growth, and third: growth. Growth is not everything, that’s true. But without growth, everything is nothing.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the fetishistic inversion diagnosed by Marx in *Das Kapital* solidified from different fronts, as workers continue to be at the disposal of “the needs of capital valorization” instead of “objective wealth” being made available to “the needs of worker development” (Marx 1971: 649). This means, that performance does not exist as a means for the consecutive satisfaction of people’s needs. Quite the opposite. Society has been experiencing a kind of strengthening of its capitalist logic, in which the satisfaction of needs is a means to induce the performance necessary to achieve the growth desired by the respective system. In other words, here it is about the exaltation of the system above the needs of “the highest essence for man” (Marx 1961: 385), that is the exaltation of the system over the human being. In this context, every end becomes a means, and every means becomes an end. With this inversion of the means-ends relationship, not only work, as Marx observed, or performance, as the first commandment of neoliberalism, but also needs themselves ultimately assume an alienated character.

The problem of alienation, however, is that it is not simply a mental construction. As Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1989) puts it, here, it is not

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1-„Deutschland kann mehr. Aber dazu brauchen wir vor allem drei Dinge: Erstens: Wachstum, zweitens: Wachstum und drittens: Wachstum. Wachstum ist nicht alles, das ist wahr. Aber ohne Wachstum ist alles nichts“ (in *Die Zeit* 2003).

about thought abstractions, but real abstractions—and, as such, said alienation has then to be understood as created by and tied to the materiality of social relations. This means that the distinction between true and false needs does not only hint at a kind of external position that is certainly impossible to adopt—a God’s Eye view being forbidden to us (Putnam). It also overlooks, as can be seen in the sixth thesis of 11 Theses on Needs, that the gravity of these alienated needs lies not in their falseness, but in their very societal truth. Capitalist society and rampant neoliberalism are a problem precisely because they are socially real. Hence, Marx argued that the ruling classes may even experience a certain degree of satisfaction in alienation by virtue of the power they gain from it, whilst the proletariat assumes a sense of destruction in alienation, recognizing “in it its impotence and the reality of an inhuman existence” (Marx 1957: 37). And if that inhuman existence is a problem today it is because it corresponds to the palpable reality of the contemporary world.

## **2. Alienation of Needs in a Differentiated Society**

Beyond the alienated character that needs can take, it is evident that society from time to time generates minimal notions of what everyone, as participants therein, ought to have at their disposal. This approach to societal analysis compels us to move from the purely philosophical debate surrounding the concept of need as such to a sociological observation of the aforementioned reality of contemporary society. Contemporary society is a modern society that, since the early days of sociology, has been described on the basis of social differentiation processes. Although the process of differentiation in the works of

Marx is grounded upon his materialistic distinction between base and superstructure, it is clear that sociology has continued to grasp this social differentiation through diverse theoretical approaches—see in this regard the thesis of different spheres of value (Weber), of an uncoupling of system from life-world (Habermas), of diverse fields (Bourdieu), or of different social systems (Luhmann). Beyond the plurality of names, all of these imply social spheres such as the economy, law, politics, education, health, etc., that operate as platforms of action, while also, as Durkheim postulates with his concept of social fact, functioning as “external” subjugators of individuals.

The existence of these—connected but distinguishable—social spheres has consequences that are relevant to the understanding of needs, insofar as it makes it possible to verify the various ways in which needs exist, change, and function throughout society. Moreover, it is from the adoption of this perspective of differentiation that it would be possible to fully understand what it means that—as has been commonly accepted within Critical Theory since Adorno’s *Thesen über Bedürfnis* and repeated in the fourth thesis of *11 Theses on Needs*—needs are always socially mediated. So, if needs are socially mediated, the differentiation of society into spheres must correlate with a variation of the needs that take shape within them. We can connect this observation to the observation of specific needs present in any given society, at least regarding the so-called basic needs of individuals. These are minimum needs associated with different social spheres and can be observed concretely in the need for food or housing (economy), to participate in the destiny of the political community (politics), for justice (law), for medical care (health), for learning or general educa-

tion (education), and so on.

The reference to these basic needs points toward the importance of considering minimum schemes of social inclusion. I am certainly not appealing here to the abandonment of the elementary normative motives with which Critical Theory took its first intellectual steps—that is, reflection on its own paths toward the generation of a post-capitalist society of equals. But we should not put the cart before the horse either: the point is precisely to recognize, describe, and observe the existing societal reality—which is increasingly differentiated—in order to subsequently acknowledge the technical possibilities that are being wasted nowadays and could be used to improve the living conditions of the population. To put it in Marx’s words (1968: 4) from his *Brief an den Vater*, it is a matter of first observing “what is,” to then ask ourselves “what should be?”

From the above, a sociological—that is, socially differentiated—observation of needs would allow us to also start on the much-needed project of updating the root of the critique of alienation that we find in Marx. Marx’s rescue of Feuerbach’s critique of religion in *Zur Kritik des Hegelschen Staatsrechts*—the “pre-supposition of all critique” (Marx 1961: 378)—according to which human beings create God only to end up being created by him, is well known. Transferring this observation to the reality of the economic system, Marx would understand that human beings create capitalism in such a way that they end up being dominated by it. So, following this logic, just as Marx has done regarding Feuerbach’s critique of religion, it would be possible to transfer the critique of the capitalist economic system to the rest of the social spheres. What would be

required here, then, is to observe the differentiated embodiment of a process of alienation that takes on various forms.

If, as we saw at the beginning, people's most basic needs take a back seat in the capitalist era, subsumed by the performance principle, this situation must be observable at all levels, i.e., how in each alienated sphere measurable performance comes before the fulfilment of actual needs or stated purposes. It is about observing, for example, how the need for food and housing is subjugated, as Marx already observed, to the performance of "capital valorization" (economy). But it is also about acknowledging how the need for participation is subjected to the mere performance of power (politics), how the need for justice is subjugated to the principle of legal performance—without further consideration for the legitimacy of such procedures—(law), how the need for medical care is subjected to the performance objectives of healthcare providers merely to ensure system maintenance (health), how the need for general learning—for "learning for life"—is subdued to the principle of technical performance through tests of extreme standardization (education), and so on<sup>2</sup>.

## Concluding Remarks

From the foregoing, it follows that a Critical Theory of society cannot be practical philosophy alone, as demanded at the end of *Saving the Needs* (Hemmerich, Henning, Jörke, and Liesenberg's contribution to this debate), but

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2 Indeed, this differentiated observation of society does not intend to hide the colonizing dynamics of the economy, but rather to complement it, insofar as not everything is directly explainable by money—as it is visible, for example, in the internal logic of power—and such a view may even appear relevant for understanding the way this monetary colonization takes shape in different social spaces.

also needs to engage in sociology. The need to establish a kind of sociology of needs is rooted in a critique of alienation, of a reified world, in which instrumental reason, as Georg Lukács observed, merges with domination of the established order. Ultimately, this critique can become an opportunity to provide the same Critical Theory with new impulses in the direction of a—now diversified—systemic critique. What is needed is so to say a differentiated systemic critique to force a global "utilization" and dominion over "resources", aimed at closing the said gap between the existing societal reality and the technical possibilities that are being wasted today. This is the only way to regain control over an escaping system that subjugates its original creator in all social spheres. It is, then, a matter of achieving a general "pacification of the struggle for existence", as pointed out by Marcuse (2007: 257). Whether all of this will also pave the path to the long-awaited society of equals remains to be seen.

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