

The Critique of Needs and its Socio-Historic Preconditions¹

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The 11 Theses on Needs revolve around the “role of needs for critique and political intervention in our times.”² However, the statements made regarding needs vary. In the 11 Theses there is talk of the demand for a “critique of [...] needs”, a “radical transformation of needs” (both T2), the rejection of “false needs” (T6), the differentiation of more justified needs and less justified desires (cf. T8), the “move beyond needs” (T9) as well as the emphasis of “radical needs” (T10).³ Thus, at first glance, one cannot help but wonder whether the authors agreed upon the existence of a uniform role that needs can play at all. This question is the starting point of my response. In the first section, I sort the statements mentioned by reconstructing the 11 Theses as a description of five partially linked modes of critiquing needs. In the second section, my reconstruction shall serve as a starting point to the question whether the preconditions to these modes of critiquing needs differ or whether they are the same. I will stress that the differentiated modes of critiquing needs presuppose an increasingly complex social theory and draw more and more on set pieces

of Marx’s critique of capitalism. In the third and final section, I will argue that these preconditions are not sufficiently discussed and reflected upon in the 11 Theses. This poses a problem, especially regarding the question of their adequacy for an analysis and critique of contemporary society. I will conclude by pointing out that the absence of the question of Marx’s actuality is only one aspect of a general lack of historicity in the 11 Theses. Future work on the critique of needs will have to have to reflect more on their historicity.

From the “radical transformation of needs” to the demand for “radical needs” and back again: Five modes of critiquing needs

My reading of the 11 Theses does not take them as a contribution to a unified critical theory of needs nor as a social ontology of needs, but as operating on a different register. Following the intentions articulated by the authors themselves, this register is the description of at least five modes of critiquing demands for need satisfaction voiced by social movements and political actors (cf. T1). That is not to say that these five modes are the only possible ones. They might not even exhaust all the modes presented in the 11 Theses. However, they are clearly at the fore. I will reconstruct these five modes to shed light on the question, which role do needs play? To my conviction, only the fifth mode ascribes needs a positive role. In particular, the first three modes of critique are united in their purely negative attitude towards need claims. In these, need claims are nothing more but an object that ought to be rejected. That would leave us with a purely negative role or, put differently, no role for needs to play in the politics of our time. However, the affirmation of needs resulting from

¹ Writing is hardly ever done alone. I thank Louis Hartnoll, Emile Ike and David Palme for their helpful commentary and remarks on the English version of this text.

² Critical Theory Network (2023).

³ All quotations in brackets refer to the theses from Celikates et al. (2023a).

the fifth mode of critique does not come without problems, as I will argue in the following sections.

The first mode of critique presented in the 11 Theses can be termed the critique of false immediacy or naturalness. If confronted with a needs claim, the authors argue, then critical theory must first pierce the veil of false immediacy, that is shrouding all needs (cf. T1-3). Their supposed naturalness and pure facticity must be confronted with their sociality.⁴ Thus, all need claims that refer to perceived natural needs are rejected by the authors.

A second mode of critique comes to the fore when the authors stress a strong normative notion of “false needs”. Even though, or rather precisely because, all needs are socially formed, some shall be critiqued as fundamentally “false” (T6). At least two ways of accounting for this falseness are presented. The first could be called immediate, the second indirect. Immediately rejected are all needs that imply the suffering of others as constitutive to their satisfaction. That is, the suffering of others is not condoned in the satisfaction of that need merely as a by-product of that satisfaction. Rather, the satisfaction of the need consists precisely in inflicting suffering on others. Accounting for a false need in the immediate way stays independent of their sociality. The second way to account for a need to be false, this time indirect, is to show that it is complicit in the exploitative, capitalist system of needs. Here, we are dealing with a need that predominantly serves the system’s purposes and in-

4 This mode of critique foreshadows the possibility of the “radical transformation of needs” (T2) due to their general sociality.

licts suffering by participating in the system’s structurally exploitative and oppressive character.⁵ Drawing on the fact of its sociality, a need is said to be false if, in its satisfaction, it inflicts suffering due to how capitalism produces the means to its satisfaction. Thus, all need claims which imply suffering, directly or indirectly, are to be rejected.

The third mode of critique deepens the focus on social relations. Instead of merely rejecting false needs, the critique now points to the social practices in which they are formed, articulated, and satisfied. Now, however, the critique is no longer concerned with the properties of needs but with the properties of these practices. It is somewhat unclear whether needs play a role here at all. For instance, it does not seem to be the case that these practices are criticised because they produce false needs. Instead, producing false needs appears to be a (by-)product of practices that are “asymmetrical, oppressive, authoritarian, monological, top-down, one-dimensional” (T7) in character. The rejection of such practices could stand independent of their connection to needs.

The fourth mode judges that some needs are more justified than others. This judgment is, however, a comparative one, and its possibility seems to be linked to the idea of an “egalitarian reorganisation of the satisfaction of

5 A similar depiction of the critique of needs is already to be found in Adorno [1942]: 103. However, in judging needs as false needs, Adorno emphasises the fungibility of a need to the self-preserving purpose of capital rather than the direct or indirect infliction of suffering.

needs” (T11). Only if we root out the systemic oppression and suffering inflicted by the capitalist system of needs can we critique individual desires, for “their satisfaction comes at the expense of others or produces individual or social harm” (T8). As long as the capitalist system of needs predominates, it is hard to make such a judgment. After all, the satisfaction of almost all needs inflicts suffering due to the oppressive nature of the capitalist system, which both determines needs and provides the means for their satisfaction. From this perspective, needs and need claims formed under capitalism are to be treated with scepticism.

Only if the critique of needs shifts gears another time and is tasked to identify “radical needs” (T10) does an actual affirmation of needs come into view. Radical needs are defined as needs that are generated by the capitalist system but which simultaneously are unsatisfiable within it. Thus, demanding the satisfaction of radical needs points beyond the capitalist system of needs. In other words, to demand their satisfaction is to press for the abolition of capitalism. Therefore, radical needs are said to be the needs that critical theory affirms and strives to reinforce within social movements. They are the needs that need to be politicised.

According to the 11 Theses, one could say that only radical needs have a role to play in the critique of and political intervention in our times. But critique can only affirm a need precisely because radical needs mirror the negative character that the critique of needs previously had. Radical needs can be affirmed, as the demand for their satisfaction leads to the “radical transformation of needs” (T2) that critical theory must push for. By demanding

their satisfaction, we arrive at a new order that will have radically broken with the liberal-individualist order of needs under capitalism. However, as I will argue in the following section, this emphasis on radical needs comes with a huge task, unarticulated in the 11 Theses, as the preconditions to judge a need to be radical are rather complex.

Unarticulated preconditions to the critique of needs

The modes of critiquing needs differentiated above come with different preconditions. The problematisation of the false immediacy or naturalness of needs can easily be considered the mode of critiquing needs, which, in comparison, has the fewest prerequisites. As stated in the 11 Theses, one does not need to be a historian or an anthropologist to realise that needs do not possess an ahistorical, continuous form (cf. T3). The critique of the naturalisation of needs can thus simply be content with pointing out the insufficiency of a natural concept of needs in view of the complexity of socio-historical concrete practices of need satisfaction.

The presuppositions of the critique of “false needs” are already more complex. First, one finds the implicit notion that what can be considered a real need is not satisfied by the suffering of others. This presupposition is sufficient to criticise racist or sexist false needs, which not only come with exploitation and violation as a by-product of their satisfaction but have an exploitative and oppressive purpose. That is, their satisfaction lies in the infliction of subjugation and harm. However, when identified indirectly, the notion that real needs do not contain the suffering of others has to be supplemented with an additional precondition: To show that the satisfaction

of a need is systematically linked to the exploitation and oppression of others, one must have a social theory of the system of needs, which provides the means to their satisfaction.

The dependence on such a social theory deepens if the critique is to move beyond needs and is supposed to criticise not only false needs but also the social practices in which these needs are formed, articulated, and satisfied. Indeed, now, the theory of social practices is the dominant concern. However, the normativity at play in judging these practices does not seem to be generated by an engagement with the concept of needs. For instance, the practices are not critiqued for insufficient needs satisfaction or for producing false needs. Instead, what seems to be critiqued is the asymmetrical form of these social practices, further characterised as authoritarian, oppressive, violent, etc. (cf. T7). However, thinking about social practices through the concept of needs provokes the counter-question: Must some practices of needs satisfaction not be asymmetrical? One might, for example, think of practices of caregiving.

Similarly, one could ask whether market relations' formal symmetry and equality do not provide a pertinent example of false needs arising from seemingly symmetrical social relations. This thought can be pushed even further: Could one not say that the individuality of needs and the possibility of their private satisfaction in virtual independence of others, as common to capitalist needs satisfaction, obscures a core aspect of what it means to have a need, namely, to be referred to an outside and to be dependent on others? In this case, it is not the asymmetry in the satisfaction of needs, i.e., the dependence on others, that would be the index of falseness but the sym-

metry, equality, and supposed independence. No matter how these questions are to be decided, such considerations must, in any case, refer to social theoretical assumptions about the capitalist system of needs. In this regard, Marx's critique of capitalism seems to be the social theory of choice. This reference to Marx is openly expressed in the affirmation of communism as emancipatory perspective. However, this reference can also be assumed when it is said that capitalism's logic "puts profits over people" (T1) and that the satisfaction of needs in capitalism can only be had at the price of exploiting others (T6 and T7). Thus, Marx's concepts of the compulsion of capital to accumulate and his concept of exploitation become implicit preconditions for the critique of needs.

Finally, an even more complex understanding of the dynamics of capitalist accumulation is required to identify needs that are produced but cannot be satisfied by the capitalist system of needs. Thus, the indebtedness of the critique of needs to Marx deepens, especially with the fifth mode of critique, namely the identification of "radical needs".

However, these increasingly complex, social-theoretical preconditions of the critique of needs remain unarticulated in the 11 Theses. That poses a problem because they can no longer be taken for granted. An open discussion of their accuracy and actuality would be required.

Lack of historicity in the 11 Theses

Anyone who wants to re-introduce the concepts of capitalist exploitation and the self-serving purpose of capital accumulation into critical theory—and I am very much on

board with this project—must confront the accusation that Marx’s categories are socio-logically, economically, or historically untenable. Axel Honneth, for example, has recently stated that “there is probably hardly anyone today who still subscribes to Marx’s labour theory of economic value”, which, however, is the “background of his thesis about the structural exploitation of wage labourers.”⁶ If one uses concepts like exploitation, as the authors do, one is presented with the task of explaining to what extent Marx’s theory of the generation and siphoning off of surplus value still applies today or, if not, in what other sense one speaks of exploitation.

Against the background of these and similar questions, an open discussion of Marx’s categories seems more tenable than a reiteration of empty phrases without commentary. The absence of such a discussion in the 11 Theses is felt even harder, as several of the joint authors have attempted to update Marx on other occasions.⁷ Integrating these attempts with the discussion of needs would also help meet the self-proclaimed aim of the authors’ collective to discuss the role of needs in our times—without this discussion the 11 Theses seem somewhat ahistorical.

This problem of lacking historicity can also be framed another way: If one refers to Marx’s concepts of exploitation and the self-serving purpose of capital to accumulate—concepts meant to fit the social reality of the nineteenth century—but one also refers to Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s discussions on needs from the

1940s, Agnes Heller’s reflections from the 1970s, and Nancy Fraser’s arguments from the 1980s, as the authors’ collective does—though, given the thesis-format, without any direct reference—this is begging the question of whether these different reflections on needs—even though they all might be somewhat Marxist—fit together all that smoothly.

To get an idea of the possible tensions between the theories referenced, one can take a closer look at the discussions on needs by Horkheimer and Adorno, which took place in the summer of 1942 in Californian exile. These discussions were held as a response to social changes that put aspects of Marx’s theory into question. Thus, Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s engagement with needs is at odds with Marx’s—at least in part. The starting point of their discussion was the following question raised by Friedrich Pollock: “Under which conditions and within which limits is a capitalist economy possible that has no voluntary unemployment and a rising standard of living for the masses?”⁸ To raise this question became necessary after social and political changes in the capitalist metropolises, such as the introduction of social insurance, the legalisation and integration of workers’ organisations and labour struggle, and state regulation of markets provided the basis for the growth of an affluent working class. However, raising the question of whether capitalism can avoid unemployment and provide for a rising standard of living permanently is putting into question the immiseration predicted in *Capital* Vol. I—after all, the general law of capitalist accumulation prognosed “an

6 Honneth 2017: 199-200.

7 Cf. Fraser/Jaeggi (2020), Loick/Jaeggi (2013a), Loick/Jaeggi (2013b), Schmidt (2019).

8 Pollock in Horkheimer et al. [1942]: 22 (my translation).

accumulation of misery, corresponding with accumulation of capital.”⁹ To my conviction, it is precisely in this regard that the discussions of the concept of need by Horkheimer and Adorno must be understood: They are an attempt to answer the question (echoing Marcuse’s words from the protocols of the discussion): What is the horror of this new state, and where is freedom still lacking when people’s needs are met?¹⁰

Put differently, Marx and Engels could still point to the apparent misery of workers in England and elsewhere as an objection to capitalist rule. In the twentieth century, capitalism was preparing to “take over the functions of socialism”¹¹ and provide for the needs of the working class. That did not leave the concept and critique of needs untouched. The critique of needs put forward by Horkheimer and Adorno became necessary precisely because the simple demand for the satisfaction of proletarian needs—fitting for Marx’s times—no longer pointed beyond capitalist relations. Generalising this observation about the historical dependency of Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique, one might state that a specific critique of needs is only ever relevant in relation to a specific historical constellation.

More will have to be said about this emphasis on the historical specificity of a critique of needs. It obviously goes together well with the conviction of critical theory that truth, instead of being “something invariable to the movement of history”, has a “temporal core”.¹² However, to keep my commentary short, I will

end by just noting that the historical context also seems necessary to the other reflections on needs, which are implicitly referenced in the 11 Theses. Heller’s reflections are—as her English editors put it—clearly located in the context of the USSR’s planned economy.¹³ Fraser, in turn, describes her work as an attempt to rescue welfare state policies in the late 1980s.¹⁴ It is not farfetched to assume that a reflection on needs in the context of a nominal socialist country (Heller) and a reflection on need in the context of the downturn of the democratic welfare state (Fraser) turn out differently and are more different still if compared with Marx’s reflection on needs from the 19th century or Horkheimer and Adorno’s reflections in the context of Fascism and New Deal politics.¹⁵ The 11 Theses, however, neither are clear about the historicity of the reflections referenced nor do they attempt to situate themselves historically. What has changed in our neoliberal, post-soviet contemporary? Without an answer to this question, the reflection on the role of needs in our times runs empty. To the defence of the 11 Theses, to demand a profoundly historical discussion would go beyond the thesis form. Nevertheless, the 11 Theses could have done more not to obscure the historical differences and developments separating the theories implicitly referenced. Future work on the critique of needs would have to reflect on

9 Marx [1887]: 559.

10 Cf. Marcuse in Horkheimer et al. [1942]: 25.

11 Ibid. (my translation).

12 Horkheimer/Adorno [1969]: xi.

13 Cf. Coates/Bodington (1976).

14 Cf. Fraser 1989: 8-13, 183 fn. 2.

15 This assumption is not disturbed by the fact that Heller’s reflection reconstructs Marx’s theory of need. The reasons why such a reconstruction seemed necessary and the questions guiding it are not to be found in Marx’s times but in the soviet context.

the historicity of the problems addressed by the concept of need and thus also ask if previous critiques are still fitting. Perhaps in this respect, it would even make sense to end the search for a method of critiquing needs and start by discussing specific needs of our time.

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