

## THESES ON NEED (1942)\*

THEODOR W. ADORNO

1. Need is a social category. Nature, the “drive,” is included in it. Yet the social and natural aspects of need cannot be separated from each other as secondary and primary, in order to erect a hierarchy of satisfactions. Hunger, conceived of as a natural category, can be satisfied with locusts and mosquito cakes, which is eaten by many savages. The satisfaction of the concrete hunger of the civilized implies that they are able to eat something that does not disgust them, and between the disgust and its opposite the entire history is reflected. The same is the case with all needs. Each drive is socially mediated in a manner that what is natural in it appears never immediately, rather always only as produced by society. To refer to nature against any need at all times merely masks denial and domination.

2. The distinction between needs of surface and depth is a socially generated semblance. The so-called superficial needs reflect the labor process; it makes humans into “appendages of the machine,” and outside of labor coerces them to reduce themselves to the reproduction of the commodity of labor power. Those needs are the marks of a state which forces its victims to flee, and at the same time keeps them so firmly under its sway that the flight degenerates always into the spasmodic repetition of the very state they flee from. It is not the superficiality that is ill in the so-called superficial needs, for its notion presupposes that of inwardness, itself a questionable one. Rather, what is ill in those needs –and they are not needs at all– is that they are oriented toward a fulfillment which at the same time betrays them precisely of this fulfillment. The social mediation of need –as a mediation by capitalist society– has reached the point where need comes into contradiction with itself. It is with this, and not with any prefigured hierarchy of values and needs, that critique must begin.

3. The so-called fundamental needs, in turn, are to a large extent products of the process of denial and fulfill a deflecting function. To play them off against the sur-

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face is already questionable not to the least extent due to the circumstance that by now monopoly has long ago taken possession of the depth and surface alike. A Beethoven symphony conducted by Toscanini is no better than the next best entertainment film, and any one starring Bette Davis is already a synthesis. This synthesis is what calls for the uttermost distrust.

4. The theory of need faces considerable difficulties. On the one hand, it argues for the social character of need and therefore for satisfying needs in their most immediate, concrete form. It cannot impose *a priori* a distinction between good and bad, authentic and fabricated, right and wrong needs. On the other hand, it has to recognize that needs as they exist in their present form are themselves products of class society. To neatly differentiate what is human and what is a consequence of repression in any need would be impossible. The danger of the domination infiltrating humans by means of their monopolized needs is no heretic faith that can be exorcised through spells, but rather a real tendency of late capitalism. This danger does not refer to the potential of barbarism after the revolution, but to the prevention of the revolution by the total society. Dialectical theory must be able to withstand this danger, as all contradictions in need. It can achieve this only by conceiving of any question concerning need in its concrete relation to the whole of the social process, rather than either sanctioning or regulating the need in general, or even suppressing it as the legacy of the bad. What is decisive today, under conditions of monopoly, is how individual needs relate to the survival of this monopoly. The unfolding of this relationship is an essential theoretical concern.

5. Needs are not static. The stasis they have ostensibly adopted today, their fixation on the reproduction of the ever-same, is itself merely a reflection of material production, which, while preserving class domination, assumes a stationary character after the elimination of market and competition. With the end of this stasis need will look entirely different. The solution of the contradiction of needs is itself contradictory. *When production is without any conditions and bounds immediately reoriented toward the satisfaction of needs, including the ones produced by capitalism, and especially these, precisely this will decisively change the needs themselves.* The impenetrability of authentic and false needs pertains essentially to class domination. Under it, the reproduction of life and its oppression form a unity; its law as a whole is transparent, yet its individual shape itself is impenetrable. Once monopoly no longer exists, it will

soon enough become apparent that neither the rubbish served to the masses by the cultural monopolies nor the miserable first-class goods of the practical ones are “needed” by them. The contention that cinema, along with housing and food, is necessary for the reproduction of labor power is “true” only in a world which conditions humans for the reproduction of labor power, and forces their needs into harmony with the entrepreneurs’ interests in profit and domination. Even in this world, putting the rule to the test would already imply a radical change of this world. Yet the idea that a revolutionary society would call for the bad acting of Hedy Lamarr, or the bad soups of Campbell, is absurd. The better the soup, the more pleasurable the rejection of Lamarr.

6. It is not fathomable why the entire culture enterprise of today would continue in a classless society. Arguably, it is an absurdity that the capitalist crisis destroys the means of production that serve need, yet the notion that in a classless society cinema and radio, which, probably, are already barely of service to anybody, will to a large extent be decommissioned, is by no means absurd due to this. The inherently contradictory character of many needs will lead to their dissolution, once they are no longer imposed by direct or indirect terror from above. The notion that the state of technical productive forces as such would require further satisfaction and reproduction of the needs whose semblance will dissolve with the capitalist society is fetishistic. In a council democracy there is no need for all wheels to turn: such a demand itself implies the fear of the unemployed, and this fear disappears with capitalist exploitation.

7. The question concerning the immediate satisfaction of needs cannot be posed under the aspects of social and natural, primary and secondary, right and wrong, for it coincides with the question concerning the *suffering* of the vast majority of all humans on the earth. If what *all* humans need most here and now is being produced, this relieves of too great a social-psychological concern about the legitimacy of their needs. Such concerns arise only when boards and responsible commissions are put in place to classify the needs, and, going by the slogan that man lives not by bread alone, prefer to allocate to him a part of the bread ration —which, as a ration, is always too small— in Gershwin records.

8. The demand of production only for the satisfaction of needs is itself part of pre-history, of a world in which production is not for need, but rather for profit and the establishment of domination, and in which, therefore, deprivation exists. If deprivation disappears, the relation of need and satisfaction will change. One of the basic means of keeping people in line in capitalist society is the compulsion to produce according to need in a form mediated by the market and subsequently fixated. Nothing is allowed to be thought, written, done, or made that goes beyond this society, which maintains its power to a large extent by means of the needs of those at its mercy. It is inconceivable that the compulsion to satisfy needs would persist in the classless society as a fetter on the productive force. The bourgeois society has largely failed to satisfy its immanent needs; instead it held production under its spell by reference to those needs. Bourgeois society was as practical as it was irrational. The classless society abolishes irrationality, in which production for profit is entangled, and it satisfies needs; it also abolishes the practical spirit that asserts itself even in the bourgeois *l'art pour l'art's* disregard for ends. It abolishes not only the bourgeois antagonism between production and consumption, but also their bourgeois unity. For something to be useless is no longer a shame. Adaptation loses its meaning. Only then will productivity act upon needs in the real, undistorted sense: not by fulfilling the dissatisfied needs with what is useless, but rather by the ability of the fulfilled need to relate to the world without modelling itself after universal utility. If the classless society promises the end of art, by abolishing the tension between the real and the possible, at the same time it also promises the beginning of art, of the useless whose intuition tends toward reconciliation with nature, for it no longer serves the benefit of exploiters.

*Translation: Devi Dumbadze*