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Towards a New Manifesto

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& Max Horkheimer

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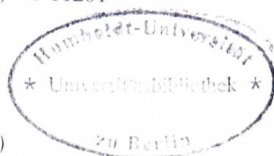
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Contents

Introduction to Adorno & Horkheimer	vii
1 The Role of Theory	1
2 Work, Spare Time and Freedom—I	13
3 Work, Spare Time and Freedom—II	21
4 The Idea of Mankind	31
5 The False Abolition of Work	35
6 Political Concreteness	41
7 Critique of Argument	45
8 The Concept of Practice	51
9 No Utopianism	57
10 The Antinomy of the Political	67
11 Individualism	75
12 The Historical Change in the Relationship Between Statics and Dynamics	77
Theses on Need <i>by Theodor Adorno</i>	79
On the Problem of Needs <i>by Max Horkheimer</i>	91



On the Problem of Needs

Max Horkheimer, 1942

Translated by Iain Macdonald¹

Introductory Note

Apart from being his contribution to the 1942 seminar on Huxley's *Brave New World* and Wallace's 'pint of milk' (see the introductory note to Adorno's 'Theses on Need'), 'On the Problem of Needs' was considered by Horkheimer to belong to the general context of research leading up to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As is well known, the latter book's first edition, under the title *Philosophical Fragments*, was dedicated to Friedrich Pollock and offered to him on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday in 1944. Along with this latter text and on the same occasion, an unpublished collection of notes

1 Max Horkheimer, 'Zum Problem der Bedürfnisse', published in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1985–1996), vol. 12, pp. 252–256. The original pagination from Horkheimer's *Gesammelte Schriften* appears in square brackets in what follows. Editorial notes have been incorporated from the German edition and supplemented as indicated by translator's notes.

and sketches was likewise dedicated and offered to Pollock. The present version of 'On the Problem of Needs' is drawn from that unpublished collection. In 1969, Pollock began to make corrections to the notes and sketches, no doubt in view of publishing them, but this plan was never realized.²

[12:252]

Written in view of a discussion of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.³

1. To set material and ideal needs [*materielle und ideelle Bedürfnisse*] against each other proves, upon closer inspection, to be untenable.⁴ Inflexible adherence

2 Gunzelin Schmid Noerr's introductory note on the essays and sketches, from which this information is drawn, can be found in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 12, pp. 250–251.

3 Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932). [The more contemporary edition consulted here is the following: Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004)—Translator's addition to the editorial note from the German edition.]

4 Ideal needs are not intellectual or spiritual needs, as opposed to material needs such as food and shelter. As Horkheimer subsequently makes clear, ideal needs are simply material needs as they are socially mediated by ideas. For example: material needs as mediated by artificial social controls and manipulation, such as the ectogenesis, neo-Pavlovian conditioning, and hypnopaedia of *Brave New World*; or as mediated by Henry A. Wallace's vision of providing a pint of milk a day to everyone while leaving the basic social order intact; or as mediated by the idea of a classless society. [Translator's note.]

to such dichotomies leads to serious theoretical and practical errors, such as accepting the static conceptual foundations of [Aldous] Huxley's and [Aage] Madelung's books, among others.⁵

2. Generally speaking, ideal needs—at least those we can work towards meeting—are nothing other than the social form of material needs or the manner in which they are to be satisfied. From the mouth of a government official, even the call for a pint of milk contains a [253] number of unstated 'formal' elements: that the milk be delivered in a clean container, that it contain no harmful bacteria, that it have a certain fat content, and so on.⁶ If taken strictly verbatim, the demand for milk could be met and we would still have been duped. Dialectic recognizes that it is not merely the nutritional value and the kind of container that play a role in determining whether the child [who receives the milk] has been tricked, but also, e.g., that father and mother not suffer under the pressure of meaningless jobs and not live in constant fear of losing

5 Aage Madelung was the author of the utopian novel *Zirkus Mensch*, published in 1918, among other books.

6 The call for a daily pint of milk for every child was part of a New Deal food project with international ambitions. It was supported by the liberal wing of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration and especially by secretary of agriculture [and later vice-president] Henry A. Wallace. [See Henry A. Wallace, 'The Price of Free World Victory', in *Democracy Reborn*, ed. Russell Lord (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944), p. 193—Translator's addition to an editorial note from the German edition.]

them, that they have appropriate housing, that a good doctor be available to them, that there exist no exploitative⁷ state of domination—a domination that can necessarily be seen in the faces and in the very essence of the parents, as well as in their surroundings, all of which in the long run spoils the milk far more than a dirty container ever could. The social order is contained within the milk, just as much as its fat content. So long as we say that it is milk that we drink rather than its chemical formula, then the difference between material and ideal needs remains extremely relative.

3. If human beings are taken in isolation and considered merely as individual living beings, then needs can be divided up and ranked. Having nothing at all to eat will kill you faster than if you have plain boiled rice to eat. Having only plain boiled rice to eat will kill you faster than if you add raw fruit to your diet. Being confined to a dark dank cell will kill you faster than if you have better air to breathe. Working in a lead mine will kill you faster than working in a movie studio. Working in some dump where accidents happen daily will kill you faster than working in a factory that has safeguards in place. Working fourteen-hour days without any time off and living in constant fear of losing your job will kill you faster than proper leisure time and the prospect of a carefree old age. Monotonous

7 Horkheimer's typescript reads: 'exploitative and terroristic'. Friedrich Pollock marked 'and terroristic' for deletion.

work that leads to extensive physiological [254] atrophy will kill you faster than varied and interesting occupations. Of course, all of this has to be understood in terms of statistical probabilities and in relation to large numbers. Establishing such a hierarchy [of needs] is in no way senseless. In such matters, among others, socialism has to approach things scientifically. However, in the application of such hierarchies to politics, things become more complicated for various reasons. For example, it is far from clear that a monotonous, gloomy, and hopeless life with an agonizing end is in any way desirable, even if it were made longer by minimally hygienic conditions. The decisive complication, though, has its roots in the social nature of human beings. The effort we put into meeting even the most basic of needs is largely deceptive when it is bound up with maintaining states of affairs that regularly bring about national and international catastrophes in which millions upon millions of human beings perish. The need to put an end to these catastrophes and to change the regime that causes them is totally obscured when we consider human beings as isolated living beings; and yet this need is in no way secondary, tertiary, higher, nobler, or more 'spiritual' than the natural necessities of life.

4. If a distinction is made between material and ideal needs, then we undoubtedly have to give priority to the fulfilment of material needs because, as the previous theses show, social change goes hand in hand with the

demand that they be fulfilled. Reason is built into this demand, so to speak. It asks for nothing other than relations that would provide all human beings with the best possible living conditions: the abolition of socially conditioned suffering. By contrast, giving priority to the isolated ideal demand [for a rational society] leads to real nonsense [e.g., as in Huxley's *Brave New World* and Wallace's 'pint of milk' idea]. One cannot assert a right to yearning, to transcendent knowledge, or to a dangerous existence [as John 'the Savage' does in *Brave New World*] and then go on to call for the elimination of radio advertising and drugstores [as suggested by Huxley's evident criticisms of the use of advertising as propaganda and of medication as a form of social control].⁸ The struggle against mass culture consists in exposing the connection between mass culture [255] and bad domination. It is ridiculous to blame chewing gum for damaging our predisposition for metaphysics [as Huxley seems to do], but it could probably be shown that Wrigley's⁹ profits and his palace¹⁰ in Chicago are

8 See especially *Brave New World*, chapter 17, pp. 207–215. [Translator's note.]

9 The chewing gum manufacturer. [In *Brave New World*, John 'the Savage' claims that a readily available sex-hormone chewing gum degrades the humanity of those who chew it and undermines our need for higher things. (See *Brave New World*, pp. 211–212.)—Translator's addition to an editorial note from the German edition.]

10 The 'palace' in question is Wrigley Field, the baseball stadium. It was commonly referred to as Wrigley's 'million dollar palace'. [Translator's note.]

the result of the social function that reconciles human beings with their bad relations and dissuades them from criticizing them. It is not that chewing gum is damaging to metaphysics; on the contrary, it is rather that chewing gum *is* metaphysics—*this* is what has to be made clear. We criticize mass culture not because it provides us with too much or because it makes our lives too secure—we can leave that to Lutheran theology. Rather, we criticize mass culture because it contributes to a situation in which we receive too little and in which what we receive is too bad; because broad swathes of society live in terrible misery, both inwardly and outwardly; and because people end up resigning themselves to injustice. In short, we criticize mass culture because it keeps the world in a state in which we have to expect large-scale catastrophes, on the one hand, and a conspiracy on the part of infernally cunning elites to broker a hellish peace, on the other.¹¹

11 Adorno quotes thesis 4 in 'Aldous Huxley and Utopia', published in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981), pp. 108–109; Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, et al., 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970–1986), vol. 10.1, pp. 111–112. However, his quotation diverges slightly from the version that was published in Horkheimer's *Gesammelte Schriften*. The main differences are as follows: 'If a distinction is made between material and ideal needs, then we undoubtedly have to give priority to the fulfilment of material needs because social change goes hand in hand with their fulfilment. Right society [*die richtige Gesellschaft*], which would provide all human beings with the best possible living conditions, is built into the fulfilment of material needs, so to speak. This is identical

5. The so-called 'ideal', as the form of the material, has to be emphasized politically, especially where material demands are circumscribed by the ruling social order and where their fulfilment is used as a means of dividing those who are subjugated by way of corruption and deflection—all of which can even take the form of 'spirit' [*Geist*]. This happens not merely through [the machinations of] the leaders of industry, but just as

with the elimination, at long last, of bad domination. By contrast, giving priority to the isolated ideal demand [for a rational society] leads to real nonsense. One cannot assert a right to yearning, to transcendent knowledge, or to a dangerous existence. The struggle against mass culture can only consist in proving the connection between mass culture and the ongoing advance of what is socially wrong [*Fortgang des sozialen Unrechts*]. It is ridiculous to blame chewing gum for damaging the predisposition for metaphysics, but it could probably be shown that Wrigley's profits and his palace in Chicago were the result of the social function that reconciles human beings with their bad relations and dissuades them from criticizing them. It is not that chewing gum is damaging to metaphysics; on the contrary, it is rather that chewing gum *is* metaphysics—*this* is what has to be made clear. We criticize mass culture not because it provides us with too much or because it makes our lives too secure—we can leave that to Lutheran theology. Rather, we criticize mass culture because it contributes to a situation in which we receive too little and in which what we receive is too bad; because broad swathes of society live in terrible misery, both inwardly and outwardly; because people resign themselves to what is wrong; and because mass culture keeps the world in a state in which we have to be prepared for large-scale catastrophes, on the one hand, and a conspiracy on the part of infernally cunning elites to broker a dubious peace, on the other.' [Translator's note.]

much through other rackets that aim at domination.¹² In the workers' movement, there persist longstanding conflicts between individual and collective interests. The attempt to absorb the satisfaction of universal interests into the limited satisfaction of particular interests has to be countered, among other things, by showing that in the long run individual interests can only be appropriately taken into consideration through the satisfaction of universal interests—which means through actual change. Stressing this point of view in opposition to immediate interests often appears [256] ideal, theoretical. But in practical politics too, just as much as in theory, it has to be shown that particular interests are at least as abstract, ephemeral, and ideal as so-called spiritual interests. To insist exclusively on the isolated material demands of a few individual groups can, in relation to a given historical situation, be just as ideologically hopeless as appealing to Christian Science.¹³ On the other hand, talk of yearning, justice, and freedom becomes meaningful when it happens in the context of fashioning a human community.

6. Observations such as those found in Huxley's book are not inherently childish—on the contrary! But they become childish the moment one insists upon them in isolation. They can switch from being false to true by

12 'Rackets' is in English in the text. [Translator's note.]

13 'Christian Science' is in English in the text. [Translator's note.]

being taken up in the context of a political critique of the present—which is not really Huxley's concern, of course. Dialectical thinking can in no way remain indifferent to the specific dehumanization that happens to human beings under monopolistic conditions [*unter dem Monopol*].¹⁴ This situation is a continuation of the reification that is the logic of capitalism. On the basis of contemporary relations, the doctrine according to which the human being has become an 'appendage of the machine' has to be nuanced, further developed, and applied to historical

14 The term 'monopoly' (*Monopol*) sometimes refers to monopoly capitalism but it is also used more generally to characterize any situation of economic, political, or cultural hegemony. At one time, it was commonly used by Horkheimer and Adorno. Indeed, there are many occurrences of the term in the 1944 edition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In the 1947 edition, however, it was nearly always replaced by more differentiated terms, e.g., 'economic apparatus', 'the culture industry', or 'the system of modern industry', among other expressions. The changes are inventoried in the notes to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 253ff.; Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, in the footnotes to the text. See Willem van Reijen and Jan Bransen, 'The Disappearance of Class History in "Dialectic of Enlightenment": A Commentary on the Textual Variants (1947 and 1944)', in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 251–252; Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, pp. 456–457. And see too Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, 'Editor's Afterword: The Position of "Dialectic of Enlightenment" in the Development of Critical Theory', in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 238–241; Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, pp. 444–446. [Translator's note.]

questions.¹⁵ That might go some way towards explaining the history of German social democracy, not to mention the American workers' movement. It would be just as wrong, as an end in itself, to attack individual manifestations of mass culture as it is important to recognize them as knots in the net that binds us to the coming disaster.

15 Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin in association with *New Left Review*, 1976), p. 799; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, 43 vols. (Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 1956), vol. 23, p. 674. [Translator's note.]