

## Marx 1: Outline of a Theory of Needs

...new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation. (390, CP 18)

Yes, but how does history *move*? Through dreams? And what are dreams but expressions of longing, and what is longing if not an expression of unrequited *needs*? So in order to understand how history moves, we must understand the theory of needs implicit in Marx.

First: how do needs emerge? They grow out of the conditions in which men and women live: out of their *social being*. Here we must reckon with Marx's materialism. Truly, it is men's (and women's) social being that determines their consciousness.<sup>1</sup> The worst that could be said of this, Avineri points out, is that it is tautological.<sup>2</sup> Social being implies human consciousness insofar as this consciousness actively shapes the reality which gives social being its meaning. That is, social being and consciousness relate dialectically. Marx's materialism, then, encompasses more than just the corporeal element (more than what is commonly meant by materialism); it includes ideology—indeed, everything that goes into constituting reality. (And even if that reality is topsy-turvy, it remains the palpable ground for social being.) Hence “As individuals express themselves, so they are.”<sup>3</sup>

We might read history, then, as the evolution of human needs, beginning with “the first historical act”, which, Marx notes, “is the production of the means to satisfy [subsistence] needs, the production of material life itself.”<sup>4</sup> Material reality, in turn, fosters further needs, and so on. By satisfying their needs, individuals create new needs to satisfy, and thereby constantly remake themselves. This is the essence of development.

The act of reproduction itself changes not only the objective conditions—e.g. transforming village into town, the wilderness into agricultural clearings, etc.—but the producers change with it, by transforming and developing themselves in production,

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy* (389, CP 17).

<sup>2</sup> “Homo Faber” (76).

<sup>3</sup> *The German Ideology*. “The Premises of the Materialist Method” (161, CP 27).

<sup>4</sup> Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy* (165, CP 29).

forming new powers and new conceptions, new modes of intercourse, new needs, and new speech.<sup>5</sup>

Avineri felicitously describes this process as “constant *anthropogenesis*, deriving from man’s ability to create objects in which he realizes his subjectivity.”<sup>6</sup> The word suggests a humanity constantly giving birth to itself, literally, through objectification in increasingly variegated forms. This suggests also that, while human needs drive history, they are eminently historical, and thus, the forms of social life they inspire, concretized as institutions and ideologies, are necessarily historical as well.

Not all needs are equal, however. Marx distinguished between real and false needs, or radical and alienated needs. Both kinds of needs motivate development, but only radical needs herald human emancipation. Alienated needs, on the other hand, deepen human confusion by burying the radical urge behind a false reality. Marx envisions development in response to radical needs as an enlarging of praxis, as “The absolute working out of (man’s) creative potentialities, with no presuppositions other than the previous historic development, i.e. the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a *predetermined* yardstick.”<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere he makes the point in terms of the “emancipated” individual: “The wealthy man is the man...in whom his own realization exists as an inner necessity, as a need.”<sup>8</sup> The wealthy man (or woman) is “rich in needs”, and real development aims to cultivate a “universality of needs”—that is, a society where everybody is not only free but encouraged to pursue his or her own self-development.

Finally, Marx considered radical needs as ultimately *self-directed*. That is, there is something, a lodestone, an unerring sense of the invertedness of reality, that enables us to sense the limitedness of the present reality relative to our capacities as human beings. Avineri calls it an autonomous intentional capacity and locates it in the human imagination (“But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees....”). However termed, Marx recognized that this “sense of reality” often took expression fetishistically (in religion, utopianism, etc.), and yet such expressions were for him but “the image of very empirical fetters.”<sup>9</sup>

Alienated needs, in contrast, distract men and women from their real needs. Under capitalism, the satisfaction of human needs is not an end-in-itself but merely a

<sup>5</sup> Marx in *Gundrisse*. Quoted in Avineri, “Homo Faber” (74).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. (85, my italics).

<sup>7</sup> *Gundrisse* (488, CP 86).

<sup>8</sup> *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (94, CP 78).

<sup>9</sup> *The German Ideology* (168, CP 31).

means to valorize capital. The market becomes where needs are created and satisfied. As such, while needs proliferate, they lack an organic and essential quality. Their variety is greatly circumscribed. As Heller points out, “Use values that do not represent exchange values cease to be objects of production, (while) qualitative needs that can be neither purchased nor quantified are inhibited.”<sup>10</sup> In all, not only the quality of needs but one’s sense of quality atrophies. As quantity is confused for quality, having is confused for being, and even in the things one has, possession counts more than enjoyment.

This is not to say that humanity is not enriched under capitalism—it is—but its enrichment is markedly lopsided. Humanity grows in technocratic sophistication; but while it excels in means, it lacks in ends. Capitalist development, despite its rapid pace, remains alienated development because its aim, ultimately, is not to satisfy human needs but to manipulate them in order to aggrandize capital, a need that is itself alienated.

Capitalist development is unbalanced—or more precisely, unbalances—in another way as well. The proliferation of false needs, conveyed expeditiously and increasingly universally through images (what the development literature calls “demonstration effects”) fosters expectations that cannot, under capitalism, be met. The realm of capitalism is distended thereby, but so too the coals of frustration and resentment smolder more intensely. The divide between the first and third worlds both internationally and within nations can thus be read entirely under the rubric of alienated needs, as a blind quarrel over the means to satiate false needs.

But this is not the whole story, for, paradoxically, while the vain pursuit of alienated needs tends to deaden humanity’s sense of its own radical needs, it also sharpens this sense to an edge. Heller remarks that alienation should not be thought of as a distortion of reality but as the condition that brings forth the radical essence of humanity, that promotes the possibility of its realization as a species “rich in needs”.<sup>11</sup> Communism as the realization of radical needs is the dream growing inside capitalism, a dream which could not have had any other dreamer.

We return, then, to a renewed consideration of the epigraph with which we began. Does history move through needs? Does humanity set itself only such tasks as it can solve? Avineri states explicitly what Marx implies: “If human society can generate a certain level of needs, one needs only adequate social organization to satisfy them.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the fact that certain needs emerge guarantees a human order able to satisfy them. Why? Because they are human needs.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Theory of Needs in Marx*. (55)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* (46)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* (80)

Such complacency, sunny with enlightenment optimism and teleological self-assurance, seems out of among the grays of the postmodern age. , among the debris of utopian projects that never materialized or materialized in nightmarish form. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether this quality of longing which Marx considered the genius of history can ever be diminished, despite the social order it animates. Quite likely, dreams once realized have dreams of their own. But perhaps that is the point: humanity “rich in needs”, because longing sharpens its innate powers and brings out its essential nature, or perhaps that is as much sense as can be salvaged from history.