

A Utopian Dialectic of Needs? Heller's Theory of Radical Needs

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Often the main concept, method or theme of a philosophy becomes the signature of its essence or novelty. Today it is sufficient to mention «deconstruction» or «communicative rationality»: the names of Derrida and Habermas seem almost superfluous. The work of Ágnes Heller prompts a similar identification with the concept of «radical needs». Not only was this concept at the heart of the book which first brought her to international prominence: it has also served as an inspirational pulse amidst the changes she has adopted to keep pace in critically monitoring dynamic modernity. From her pathbreaking *The Theory of Need in Marx* (1974), through the frontal assault on the system of the command economies in *Dictatorship Over Needs* (1983) (with Fehér and Márkus) to her vision of modernity as the «Dissatisfied Society» (1985) shaped by a structural tendency always generating new needs which constantly overleap the bounds of possible satisfaction, culminating in her recent essay 'A Theory of Needs Revisited' (1993), the concept of needs has been both a philosophical signature and a touchstone from which she has always taken her bearings. One way to conceive the gradual accumulation of her works is as an ever widening circumference traceable to this centre. The following will chart the history of Heller's own theory of needs, show how it has evolved in relation to her own maturing philosophical stance, and assess its current status?

Marx's «Brilliant Incoherence»

Looking back Heller calls her book on Marx's theory of needs a «finger exercise» towards her own theory of needs.¹ While still located within a programme of «Marx Renaissance» concerned to revitalise the authentic Marxian message obscured by the official ideology, her interpretation already showed signs of an increasing critical distance. The fact that *The Theory of Needs in Marx* could not be published in Kadar's Hungary and did not see the light of day until 1976 is some measure of its theoretical radicality. The once obvious practical implications are today easily missed by a contemporary reader. Although strategically avoiding any discussion of the concrete problem of the «transition to socialism» ostensibly on the grounds that Marx himself had not treated this problem², Heller's general theorisation of the problem of needs in Marx had already moved beyond

1 Heller, A., 'A Reply To My Critics' in Burnheim J (Ed.) *The Social Philosophy of Agnes Heller*, J. Ropodi, Amsterdam, 1994, p. 284.

2 Heller, A., *The Theory of Need in Marx*, Allison and Busby, London, 1976, p. 100.

the limits of official acceptability³. The crucible of Heller's theory of needs is a conception of total revolution which signifies not just the overturning of political regimes or relations of production but the transformation of everyday life. This attack on official Marxism even extends to her treatment of Marx himself. She sets about pointing out tensions in his theory, his own illusions and views his greatness primarily in his «brilliant incoherence»⁴. As Heller saw it at that time, the crux of this «incoherence» was the deep ambiguity in Marx's explanation of the revolutionary overcoming of capitalist society, his fluctuation between viewing revolution as the necessary outcome of quasi-natural laws of the economy and as the conscious act of an increasingly radicalised collective subjective power.

Within the Lukacsian programme of a «Marx Renaissance» Heller presents us with the humanist Marx whose entire theory draws its critical power from the philosophical critique of alienation. Challenging orthodoxy, Heller asserts that the concept of need plays one of the main, if not the main, role in Marx's critique. Whereas classical political economy had excluded all extra-economic needs and conceived the needs of workers only as a limit to wealth, Marx clearly rejected this standpoint as a ideological mainstay of capitalism. To reduce workers to merely means for the expansion of capitalist wealth is to speak from the standpoint of the capitalist alienation of human needs⁵. For Marx, socialism presupposes a transformation of the entire structure of needs. Increased productivity is no longer perceived solely in terms of quantitative expansion of commodities and exchange value but takes the form of increases in both the quantity and quality of use values⁶. The society of «associated producers» signifies the positive category of a system of non-alienated needs⁷. Need is primarily a category of value. While the concept of need is given a variety of interpretations by Marx, all contain an emphatic aspect of value-judgment. In this respect the categories of needs function as anthropological value categories which allow him to evaluate the alienated needs of capitalist society⁸. For Marx, the most important category of value is wealth. Wealth is the condition for the unfolding of «human» needs and the basis for the free development of all aspects of individuality. Heller underlines that while it was the young Marx who elaborated this category of need, from this time it is presupposed in all his later works⁹. Every judgement in Marx's critique of capitalism is measured on the basis of the positive values of a humanity rich in human needs and it is this which ensures that his critique transcends the limits of a merely implicit critique of capitalism¹⁰.

Yet, if Marx's critique is more than an implicit critique of capitalism, this is not to attach some transcendent status to it. Humanity «rich in needs» is not only Marx's fundamental value ideal but also integral to his immanent explanation of the processes of historical change. Underlying the idea of wealth of human needs is Marx's paradigm shift to the paradigm of objectivation based on the notion of finite subjectivity. Heller is at pains to point out that all attempts to demarcate between

3 George Markus recalls that it was the essay «Theory and Practice From the Standpoint of Need» a summary of the main theses of the book which served as the official pretext for her removal from Hungarian cultural life. See his 'The Politics of Morals' *The Social Philosophy of Hgnes Heller*, op. cit., p. 278.

4 Heller A, op. cit., p. 88.

5 Ibid, p. 26.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid, p. 27.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid, p. 38.

10 Ibid, p. 39.

«natural» and «socially produced», «material» and «spiritual», «necessary» and «luxury» needs are blurred by the essential historicity in Marx's understanding of human needs. Marx locates human needs within a historical dialectic where the totality of needs unfold in a dynamic process fuelled by labor. Objectification stimulates a dynamic of enriched needs. Heller underscores that, for Marx, needs are not just passions but also capacities. Unlike animal need which is biologically fixed and can develop only in regard to the manner of satisfaction, human needs increasingly engage activities which generate capacities and a spiral of ever-new needs¹¹. The human dimension of satisfaction through objectification imparts to human needs an inherently qualitative dimension. This historical dimension of need creation and augmentation underlines the social constitution of individuality: that human needs are formed and conditioned within a human environment. However, this forming results not from a passive imprinting but an active response in the shape of capacity generating activities. For Marx, historicity is not the domain of super-individual processes and forces but the practical activity of concrete individuals circumscribed but never determined by their historico-social circumstances. The new paradigm allows for the recognition of the social constitution of human need through humanity's historical and sensuous determinations without losing sight of the ineliminable subjective aspect.

Heller's reconstruction of the theoretical motives behind the Marxian concept of need allows her to challenge two ideologically charged notions within the orthodox reading. At the core of Marx's understanding of the alienation of needs was his belief that Capitalism subordinated humans as means in the process of wealth accumulation. Bourgeois society was primarily focused on exchange value and this leads to the homogenisation of needs. Use values that cannot be translated into exchange value cease to be objects of production and the dominance of money as the quantitative measure of needs means that need is reduced to possession and the quantifiable. Heller admits that Marx's attitude to this homogenisation of needs matures in his work as he comes to acknowledge the emancipatory dimension of capitalism. However, she insists that Marx always considered the notion of interests to be a product of homogenisation that accompanies the bourgeois quantification of all needs. It becomes more prevalent only with the triumph of bourgeois social relations. As a motive of individual action, interest is nothing else than the reduction of need to greed. The philosophical generalisation of the category of interests to classes is the product of a society where the essentially qualitative and concrete dimension of needs has been suppressed by the processes of homogenisation¹². The category of interest is unknown in ancient and medieval philosophy¹³. Bourgeois society is the first «pure» society where abstract, impersonal social relations have been superimposed on the compulsions of nature and assumed a quasi-natural independence and necessity. Here the qualitative dimensions of individual need must be translated into the quantitative currency of alienation.

More dangerous than smuggling bourgeois categories into Marxian discourse, was the equation of «social needs» with this alienated category of general interests. Here Heller implicitly commences her critique of «really existing socialism». When social needs are equated with general interests, the former are somehow «suspended above» real individuals and viewed as «higher» or «more general». Typically they are perceived as more «real» and authentic while the needs of real individuals seem less so. Consequently, in cases of conflict this identification served to legitimate

11 Ibid. p. 41.

12 Ibid. p. 57.

13 Ibid. p. 59.

the subordination of the needs of individuals to general interests. At this stage, Heller is not yet critical of the Marxian distinction between class consciousness and empirical consciousness. However, she is already quite clear that in practice the theoretical distinction between individual needs and social needs or general interests requires a privileged perspective. In practice this always serves the needs of a dominant class or group.

The pursuit of Marx's genuine thoughts on revolution and the notion of interests uncovered tensions in his own understanding of the dynamic of capitalism. These surface with her signature concept of «radical needs». Heller's critique of the notion of interests concludes with this point: the concept of the class interests of the working class is not an interest in revolutionary transcendence but rather a struggle for wages and other improvements which remained within the reified horizons of economic class struggle within capitalism. In other words, the notion of working class interests only captures the working class in its alienated capitalist personae. Revolutionary struggle presupposed a further level in the development where struggle moves beyond issues of economic distribution to that of a direct political challenge to the bourgeois organisation of society as a whole.

According to Heller, Marx sees the key to this transcending political self-consciousness in radical needs generated by the life-situation of the workers. Marx understands these radical needs in the following way. They are immanent to capitalist society insofar as this system cannot function without them¹⁴. Here Marx emphasises the social totality. The capitalist structure of needs is not some independent variable but an integral moment of an organic unity of production, distribution and exchange. In this totality, needs are not allocated by birth but by status ascribed according to political and economic institutions and functions. This link between need ascription and political and economic functionality introduces the moment of social dynamism and individual striving. Heller makes this link responsible for an accompanying shift in the character of bourgeois needs from dominance of quality to quantity. Yet while radical needs are immanent to capitalist society, what constitutes their radicality is not their mere being but their satisfaction which would signify the transcendence of capitalism. They cannot be satisfied within the existing bourgeois organisation of society¹⁵. The transcendent quality of these needs lies in their objects. Capitalism tends to the quantification of needs. Based on markets and exchange, this shift has an emancipatory function: it allows the individual to more actively shape their own need structure. Capitalism gives rise to a broad proliferation of needs like those for freedom, free time, artistic activity and personal development. However, while generating these needs, capitalism is unable to accommodate their satisfaction. This would require the breach of structural mechanisms of inequality and exploitation that are the foundation of the system. But Heller goes further. Radical needs are not just defined negatively. Heller's more emphatic point is that socialism involves an entirely new structure of needs which imply not just greater quantitative satisfaction but a fundamentally altered quality¹⁶. Marx's value choice of wealth will be embodied in a need structure that promotes quality as free time, labor as intellectual work and artistic activity, personal development and freely chosen community in enriched forms.

Thus the third defining aspect of radical needs is quality. Heller argues that Marx foresaw in the post-revolutionary society of associated producers a tendency towards an entirely new structure of

14 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

needs. Despite having attained a much higher level of material wealth, in this society consumer goods would increasingly play a more limited role.¹⁷ Social wealth would no longer be measured solely in terms of productivity and non-material values like free-self-activity and personal development would transform the need structure towards heterogenous, individualised qualitative needs. In such a society material wealth is merely a pre-condition: the only limit imposed on individual need will be that of other qualitatively different needs¹⁸.

This notion of radical needs is the key both to Heller's reconstruction of the ambiguities in Marx and to her forceful implicit critique of «really existing socialism». She argues that the philosopher Marx was faced with the problem of how his subjectively affirmed «ought» was to be realised¹⁹. In the light of his own emphatic critique of the impotence of the whole philosophical tradition, it was essential for Marx to find a theoretical means of overcoming this infirmity. He found two ways of materialising his philosophical «ought» between which he fluctuated for the rest of his life. Although ultimately theoretically contradictory and implying opposed practical strategies, in Marx's mind they became unconsciously fused together²⁰.

The first solution is Fichtean because of the emphasis placed on active subjectivity. The subjective «ought» permeating the philosophical figure of alienation is transformed into the material claim of a social collectivity in the shape of the proletariat. Alienation stimulates radical needs which propel the masses to collectively realise them. The second solution is Hegelian: the emphasis shifts away from active subjectivity towards the objective dynamic of being in the shape of the inherent laws of the economy. Here the antinomies of capitalist society represent only a particular instantiation of the general laws of historical development. In other words, the «ought» now assumes the form of causal necessity. Heller acknowledges that had Marx held consistently to this position the idea of radical needs would have been superfluous²¹. The notion that the economy operates according to quasi-natural laws is the appearance of the fetishised commodity relations. By contrast, the intellectual force of the idea of radical needs is the stimulation of needs which shatter this fetishized appearance.

The revolutionary scenario involving radical needs relies not on historical laws but a specific analysis of the dynamics of the capitalist commodity form. Bourgeois society produces not only alienation but increasingly the consciousness of alienation: the wage labourer, formally free but concretely exploited, develops radical needs in the shape of a range of species capacities. Marx initially links his own emancipatory perspective to the proletariat because he viewed this class as one which had no particular goals within bourgeois society. For it the possibility of emancipation depends upon becoming the bearer of a universal perspective and the agent of total revolution. In his later works the underlying structure of this scenario remains. However, the emphasis shifts towards the proletariat's development of universal capacities in the form of collective activity, increased consciousness and the integral development of the worker as machinery replaces specialised labour²². In both scenarios, the philosophical critique of capitalism assumes an immanent historical force. This immanent dynamism assumes an explicitly subjective shape in the form of an increasingly cohesive collective class contesting reified relations.

17 Ibid, p. 102.

18 Ibid, p. 105.

19 Ibid, p. 74.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid, p. 79.

22 Ibid, pp. 92-93.

Yet all Marx's efforts cannot conceal the illusory character of this immanent power. Marx had invented radical needs. Despite his belief that revolution was guaranteed by these needs, the truth was that they were little more than Marx's own subjective dreams. Radical needs are the consciousness of alienation. However, this consciousness itself is nothing but a theoretical construct, not the empirical consciousness of the working class²³. In Marx's time, this consciousness had not yet become actual. For Heller, even today the question of whether capitalism produces such needs has still not been answered²⁴. Yet, while distancing herself from Marx's illusions, Heller insists that this collective «ought» remains a «practical necessity». In the heady days of the early seventies Heller still nurtured a few illusions of her own. While Marx had been compelled to «invent» radical needs not yet actualised, we can now see them «with our own eyes»²⁵. Adopting the optimism of the Western New Left, Heller obviously viewed the widespread movements of student protest and counter-culture as a clear manifestation of emerging new needs and believed in sympathy with Marcuse that the working class was not the sole or even the primary bearer of radical needs²⁶.

The basic features of Heller's own theory of radical needs are here firmly articulated. The illusory status of Marx's normative standpoint is exposed in the assertion that the radical needs he attributed to the proletariat were his own invention. They did not exist in Marx's own time. Heller has loosened her commitment to a philosophy of history and categorically rejects the idea of historical inevitability. On the one hand, she maintains that history has not yet decided whether capitalism immanently produces such needs. On the other, her remaining commitment to this optimistic philosophy of history is apparent in her view that radical needs are now manifest both at the heart, and the margins of, the orthodox working class movement. Heller's book on Marx's theory of needs clearly also reveals her own internal theoretical struggle: she attempts to release the contemporary critical core of Marx's own thought while, simultaneously, gradually formulating her own independent position. Heller was soon to make a decisive step in this latter direction when she finally abandoned the Marxian philosophy of history.

Substitutionalism and the False Ontology of Needs

This struggle takes another significant step in the essay entitled 'Can 'True' and 'False' Needs Be Posited' (1980) (later republished in *The Power of Shame: A Rational Perspective* 1985)²⁷. There Heller recapitulates familiar themes and positions but they now treated analytically in a way that divorces them from the former Marxian framework.

Heller's initial critique of the concepts of interest and social needs had expressed her repudiation of «real socialism» with its command economy and authoritarian political substitutionalism. This involved a rejection of concepts which privileged specific standpoints in relation to needs and in practice allowed powerful institutions to hierarchise needs. This same point is accentuated in her own theory of needs. She rejects all attempts to distinguish ontologically between needs. To assume that one can designate some needs as «true» and others «false» is to usurp the position of God

23 Ibid, p. 95.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid, p. 86.

26 Ibid.

27 Heller A., «Can 'True' and 'False' Needs Be Posited»? *The Power Of Shame: A Rational Perspective*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1985.

standing outside the world²⁸. Knowledge is always the product of fetishised social conditions. All attempts to theoretically divide needs into true and false on naturalist grounds also fails because needs are always historically conditioned and socially codified. There are no convincing trans-historical objective criteria according to which they could be divided. Yet, these theoretical problems are dwarfed by the practical dangers. Institutionally designated hierarchisation of needs leads directly to the dictatorship over needs²⁹. Heller maintains that the distinction between «true» and «false» needs must not be assimilated to that that between «imaginary» and «real» and its tendency to discount the reality of the former. All needs felt by humans are real and all must be acknowledged without attempting to allocate them into ontologically distinct groups³⁰.

Yet it does not follow from the acknowledgement of all needs that all should be satisfied. This ignores the fact that in present dynamic societies there are more needs than can be satisfied by the society under reigning conditions³¹. Institutional mechanisms are required for determining priorities between conflicting needs on the basis of a democratic-public debate. Here the norm of acknowledging all needs must be fused with democratic principles in order to produce consensually determined priorities³².

Heller's repudiation of an ontologically founded distinction between needs and her displacement of the question of actual satisfaction to the political institutions of democratic priority setting is not simply avoidance of the hard question of theoretical discrimination between needs. On the contrary, she argues that the general acknowledgement of all needs neglects the ethical aspect³³. While all needs felt by humans are equally real, this does not mean they are equally good. Heller argues that we cannot do without the distinction between «good» and «evil» . This would open the door to needs requiring oppression and exploitation, In practice the needs of the oppressed and exploited would be undermined. It is no accident that all concrete societies have refused to acknowledge «sinful» needs. However, all efforts to reintroduce some fixed moral roster into modern dynamic are doomed because they presuppose a privileged standpoint that disappeared with divine knowledge³⁴.

Heller solution is Kantian: she opts for an ethical norm that is both formal and substantial. The norm of the categorical imperative «not to use another as a mere means» does not dictate circumstances but it is sufficiently concrete to allow us to grasp instances³⁵. Heller's Kant is a moralist poised at the historical precipice of the explosion of the bourgeois quantification of needs. Kant speaks of «thirsts»: these are not concrete needs but unsatisfiable alienated needs. The Kantian norm allows for the recognition of all needs without having to proscribe particulars: it disqualifies those alienated needs based on mere quantification. Heller intention is not to morally condemn concrete needs but to designate options which refer to preferred systems of needs and the ways of life reflected in them³⁶. The important function of options here is to influence and guide the development of systems of needs while critiquing alternatives.

28 Ibid. p. 285.

29 Ibid. p. 287.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid. p. 288.

34 Ibid. p. 289.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid. p. 291.

Modern dynamic societies are pluralist and conflictual. Various ways of life claim to correspond to the needs of people. However, such correspondence rarely exists. Often needs are merely imputed. Real needs are disregarded as inauthentic or it is claimed that whole classes of individuals have needs of which they are entirely unaware. Here Heller struggles with the burdens of her own Marxist inheritance and her desire to finally learn its lessons. She categorically repudiates this imputation. She distinguishes between desires and needs precisely on the basis that only the latter are conscious. Nevertheless, the very idea of radical needs requires a level of critical imputation. Heller questions whether the awareness of needs is always homogenous, does it not differ in level and form? She recalls Sartre's distinction between «need as deficiency» and «need as project» to illustrate the point that a felt lack does not necessarily signify the shape of a potential satisfaction. It may be that the social institutions and objectivations required for the satisfaction of a particular need are simply absent³⁷. Need as a sense of lack can exist as an accumulating frustration that finds expression in irrational forms. Heller validates Sartre's distinction because the essence of the notion of radical needs depends upon treading the very fine line between outright imputation of needs which Heller rightfully repudiates as the theoretical precursor of the brutal dictatorial denial of needs and acquiescence in the existing structures of bourgeois need. Heller's fine line rests on the hope that there is a form of need amongst broad social strata which has not yet found its voice in the form of appropriate social institutions and objectivations. Heller is aware that even the distinction between need as «lack» and «project» involves imputation. Such imputation is always a pseudo-form of fulfilment of needs. However she argues that in this case imputation is «reasonable» because what is being imputed is not the existence of the need itself which already exists as «lack» but the transformation of this «lack» into a «project» were the appropriate institutions and objectivations available: the value guiding the preference of a system of needs 'points out existing needs in present society whose satisfaction *may* lead towards the preferred system of needs'³⁸. As this implies judgement concerning the future of which we can never be certain, it cannot be true knowledge. Thus even «reasonable» need imputation remains counterfactual and pseudo-fulfilment. Echoing Arendt, Heller reiterates the point that ideas and values only ever temporarily, in «great historical moments», successfully guide systems of needs. The tragic history of modern revolution demonstrates that even democratic ideals and objectivations remain elitist without embodiment in institutions and social life³⁹.

This is the old Marxian complaint against mere philosophy. Theory lacks the power of generalisation that belongs to the power structure of every society. These power structures possess their own inherent preferences and are capable of bringing about their own systems of objectivations which shape needs and the forms of their satisfaction. It is this power of the existing which is the pervasive form of manipulation in bourgeois society. Not as overtly oppressive as the dictatorship over needs, it is nonetheless just as effective in limiting the exploration of alternative structures of needs. In practice, it achieves precisely the sort of division of needs into «real» and «unreal» that Heller wants to reject as a false «ontologisation» of needs.

Despite its counterfactual fragility, Heller endorses the Kantian norm of recognising all needs as long as they do not involve the degradation of other humans to the status of mere means. This norm is the signature of radical needs: it is inconceivable without the idea of a society which has

37 Ibid, p. 293.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid, p. 294.

transcended social relations based on hierarchy and exploitation. Whether this norm can be anything more than a theoretical construct as it is in Marx depends upon the empirical prevalence of radical needs. Here Heller makes her own wager. She admits that the progressive forces struggling for radical needs constitute only a social minority⁴⁰. Nevertheless, she still maintains that the aims and aspirations of this minority represent all humanity. It will be recalled that Marx employs an almost identical justification of the proletariat's claim to represent a universal interest. The liberation of the proletariat also signifies the emancipation of all classes. Heller's argument for the universality of the minority perspective of radical needs toys with dispensing with this outright imputation. The essence of the Kantian norm of radical needs is the satisfaction of all needs⁴¹. There is after all no Chinese wall between ordinary empirical needs and theoretically posited radical needs. Social movements, parties and interest groups devoted to non-radical aims can generate radical needs just as some radical aims can be satisfied in present societies as long as they remain democratic⁴². The idea of satisfying all needs is itself radical in the social context of inequality and exploitation. Clearly Heller is reluctant to lose a firm basis in the substance of real empirical needs. This preference is indicated by the reference to the satisfaction of *all existing* needs excluding those requiring the reduction of others to means. However, such efforts to avoid imputation by bridging the gap between ordinary and radical needs cannot conceal the fact that radical needs as defined by Heller belong to a set that is not identical to that of needs not currently being satisfied. The essence of radical needs is not just that they are not currently satisfied but that they cannot be satisfied within existing social arrangements. It is this that bestows upon them their specific qualitative and transcendent impetus.

Heller immediately raises the question of whether this ascription of universality to the minority perspective of radical needs is ideological. Acutely aware of the potential dangers involved her answer is not necessarily so⁴³. First of all, a non-ideological politics of radical needs requires a politics of persuasion rather than compulsion. This implies acceptance of a democratic legal state and the pluralism of competing systems of needs within it. Radical needs are pluralist and incompatible with the subordination of the other to the status of mere means⁴⁴. True qualitative satisfaction requires the proliferation of ways of life not the dominance of one single form. This allows the right to criticise and the advocacy of life forms conforming to favored values. But, it must repudiate manipulation and the resurrection of false ontological distinctions between «true» and «false» needs⁴⁵. The commitment to pluralism implies the creation of alternatives and diversity. This is more than the affirmation of democratic forms. For Heller, democratic institutions are a tool rather than an end in itself. They cannot be the source of new systems of needs but only the vital framework of the *labor of democracy* as participation, public debate, decentralisation, new objectivations and the resulting transformation of structures of need⁴⁶.

By the late seventies the main feature of Heller's reconstructed theory of needs is clear. She has distanced herself from her initial Marxian framework and relocated the notion of radical needs within a pluralistic democratic politics. At this stage the focus of her concern is the dangerous

40 Ibid. p. 296.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid. p. 297.

45 Ibid. p. 296.

46 Ibid. p. 298.

political implications of a dogmatic ontological division of needs into «true» and «false». The affirmation of radical needs as a vehicle for critique and social transcendence within pluralistic democracy must not serve as just another form of substitutionalism. Bitter experience had awakened Heller to the great political dangers of the Marxian version of ascribed consciousness. However this sensitivity had not yet issued in any explicit analysis of the underlying Marxian theoretical framework. Only in the last decade or so has she finally wrestled her theory of needs from the last residues of its former Marxian integument. This required that she takes issue with the underlying philosophy of history and integrate her theory of need into a more comprehensive vision of modernity which would now supersede the Marxian critique of capitalism.

«Dissatisfaction» in Dialectical Perspective

Final retreat from a historically obsolete revolutionism dictated a resituation of radical needs within a new theoretical framework. In the eighties this led Heller and Fehér to new insights into the contemporary dynamics of modernity. Whereas Marx had confidently directed all his animus squarely at capitalism and commodification, Heller now refocuses her critical gaze to modernity and the more elusive and paradoxical figure of quantification. The emergence of modern bourgeois society in the 18th century is still made responsible a fundamental shift in the social mechanisms of need allocation: from allocation by birth to allocation by function and the dominant economic and political institutions of bourgeois society. Kant noted that this shift was accompanied by processes of the quantification of needs and the reduction of quality to quantity. Notwithstanding this, Marx was precipitant in assimilating this phenomenon solely to commodification⁴⁷. Heller and Fehér now understand modernity as the product of not one but three interconnected complementary and conflictual logics (capitalism, industrialisation and democracy. The crux of Heller's argument is that the Soviet Union under the domination of the logic of industrialisation but without the supporting mechanisms of the capitalist market, still allowed the processes of quantification to flourish⁴⁸. The Marxian critique of quantification is therefore superficial. The latter requires a much deeper understanding: quantification permeates not just modern social institutions and experience but also our view of nature yet even now is not completely understood⁴⁹. The abandonment of the centrality of commodification means that Heller must now maintain a delicate balance between outright Romantic hostility to and a complacent liberal defence of the processes of quantification. The Romantic critique still has clout but the waning sense of community and solidarity can be bolstered neither by communitarian restoration nor from the critique of freedom. On the other hand, neither can liberal paeans to the efficiencies of self-regulation conceal the gulf between socio-political imputation of needs and the actual need structures of real individuals. As a defender of modernity Heller embraces quantification despite its thorns. She goes further than Marx in affirming not just science but even the market. In this shape the processes of quantification have enhanced social freedom and the autonomy of individuals. Heller is reconciled with the essential dynamism of

47 Heller, A., 'A Theory of Needs Revisited' *Thesis Eleven*, No 35 MIT, 1993, p. 22.

48 *Ibid.* The strength of this argument to some extent relied upon the assertion that the Soviet System represented itself a unique and self-reproducing constellation of these logics that could be characterised as a singular version of modernity. Of course, whether in the light of the total collapse of this system this view can be sustained is open to question. However this may be, Heller clearly still believes it can and her argument here really turns on the independent presence of the processes of quantification in the Soviet model.

49 *Ibid.*

modernity. This finds its clearest expression in her idea that modernity is the «dissatisfied society». «Dissatisfaction» is not equivalent to the Marxian notion of alienation. A structure of needs oriented mainly to quantitative satisfaction of «wants» will manifest all the hallmarks of alienation⁵⁰. However, modern «dissatisfaction» is no systemic dysfunction that we might ultimately hope to remove or fix but the motor of the very dynamic of the social arrangement that calls itself modernity. This dynamism is inherent in the fact that modernity generates more needs that it can possibly satisfy⁵¹. Along with the perspective of transcendence we must also forego the utopian Marxian desire for the end of contradiction and alienation. In Heller's vocabulary, «dissatisfaction» signals not just the pain of unsatisfied needs. It is also the manifestation of a positive social dynamic that strives on negation as the lifeblood of change. Dissatisfaction is merely the corollary of a denial of transcendence, the expression of a discontinuity within continuity which maintains the delicate pendulum of modernity without wild swings into chaos and without abandoning all prospects of alternatives inspired by qualitatively enhanced structures of need.

This new appreciation of the dynamics of modernity requires a more discriminating critique of quantification. The potential of markets to translate qualities and quantities has increasingly allowed individual need to be distinguished from political and social ascription of needs. Heller makes no pretence of knowing the ultimate consequences of the processes of quantification. Whether the distinction between individual needs and socio-political allocation of needs will be sustained or effaced is uncertain. In the face of this uncertainty, she wages on the endurance of the distinction while recognising that one of the profoundest problems facing modernity is the measurement of quality in a world which no longer recognises it in any other terms than individual choices. This is more than a problem of translating quantity back into quality at the point of individual life. It points beyond individualised translation to that of systems of needs and their relative qualities from which all needs emanate and must be reinserted⁵². In modernity the reconciliation of quality and quantity is driven largely by quantitatively fired subsystems like the economy and bureaucracy. One of the great challenges faced in keeping the pendulum of modernity swinging evenly in the coming era will be the question of limits likely to impose itself ever more forcefully in the future. Heller is not about to offer predictions about the future. She is chastened by the disastrous human consequences of rampant philosophy of history. Nevertheless, she is still committed to a qualitative reform of modern structures of needs sufficient to meet this challenge by extending the achievement of free, pluralist and democratic societies without destabilising modernity's pendulum. In her view, a radical philosophy still has an active role to play in the task of public debate over the alternative options before modernity. This stance is epitomised in Heller's perseverance with the concept of radical needs.

Previously Heller's theory of radical needs was premised on the Marxian philosophy of history and its notion of historical transcendence of bourgeois society. In her 1993 revisit to the theory of needs she continues to argue that radical needs exist but now insists that they cannot be temporalised within a grand narrative⁵³. Revolutionary projects premised on redemptive

50 This conceptual distinction between «wants» and «needs» is based on two types of orientation and their objects. Wants conform to the category of lusts, are values in quantitative measures and are ultimately incompatible with universal freedom and life as the leading value ideas of modernity. Needs, on the other hand, are orientated to these modern values, in as much as their focus is individual self-determination. See 'Can «True» and «False» Needs be Posited? *The Power of Shame*, op. cit.

51 Ibid, p. 32.

52 Ibid, p. 24.

53 Ibid, p. 33.

conceptions of politics and presuppositions of unlimited growth were disasters which must now be abandoned. This occasions a subtle shift of emphasis in Heller's characterisation of radical needs. Earlier radical needs were primarily the motor of transcendence. Heller defined them in three ways. They were generated by bourgeois society but structurally unsatisfiable within it⁵⁴. They also anticipated a new structure of needs and were therefore essentially qualitative needs rather than bourgeois quantitative ones⁵⁵. However, the Marxian framework gave priority to the unsatisfiability of these needs within the existing bourgeois configuration of society. While Heller confirms her former definition of radical needs, she now employs a less specific and more normative formulation of the transcendence theme. Radical needs are now those 'not to be satisfied in a world based on subordination and superordination'. But as she also now believes that 'a society free from social hierarchy, social conflicts....'cannot be achieved by 'the practical negation of the present phase of the modern social arrangement', the idea of radical needs has become a more traditional normative call directed at the qualitative enhancement of the existing structure of needs. Rendering the transcendence theme less immanent and concrete is therefore coupled with this shift of emphasis to the qualitative aspect of radical needs. Radical needs are primarily those which cannot be quantitatively satisfied.

The belated spectre of limits is an additional good reason for overturning the Marxian philosophy of history. A special emphasis must now fall on the essentially qualitative aspect of all needs⁵⁶. In addition the perspective of limits now prompts an array of questions which penetrate the heart of modernity's dynamic. Over or under use of resources both natural and human are all potential dimensions of instability. Heller even entertains the possible depletion of the language game of science as another possible threat on the horizon of modernity⁵⁷. The dynamic society is sustained by the rapidity of change. The range of potential material and cultural obstacles to smooth social reproduction and the incessant need to supply satisfiers to the burgeoning ascribed rights represent a real threat to the dynamic on which this society depends.

This concentration on the problem of limits reinforces the emphasis on the quality dimension of radical needs which was otherwise already demanded by the disappearance of a revolutionary scenario as a real historical alternative. Heller now constructs her theory not from the perspective of the «associated producers» but from the heart of the embattled welfare state. The main feature of this modern social arrangement is the mixture of the market and other socio-political forces such as movements and lobbies in the re-allocation of needs. Modern civil society is an open contest between self-attributed claimants of needs who appeal to the state for satisfiers and redistribution. Heller views this modern civil society as a great vehicle of justice insofar as the inequalities of money and power can here be counter-balanced by the sheer numbers of groups and individual claimants⁵⁸. Adopted only by a minority of societies, surrounded by threats and burdened with internal problems, this model remains a model of universal significance. Its emulation all over the world would signify real progress⁵⁹. At this point a strong Hegelian motif appears that is not easily reconciled with all connotations of the idea of «radical needs». Having attained this plateau of

54 Heller, A., *The Theory of Need in Marx*, op. cit., p. 97.

55 Ibid, p. 102.

56 Heller, A., 'A Theory of Needs Revisited' op. cit., p. 35.

57 Ibid, p. 32.

58 Ibid, p. 26.

59 Ibid, p. 28, Yet, what this progress can mean in the light of her earlier critique of progress as anything other than an ideal of gains without losses is not clear.

historical development and assimilated the bitter revolutionary lessons of the 20th century, the focus of attention shifts to narrowing the gap between ascribed needs and the provision of satisfiers⁶⁰. Within the context of this more pronouncedly social democratic vision focused on the question of distributive justice and the narrowing of inequalities as expressed in the gap between claimed socio-economic needs and the scarcity of their satisfiers, the concept of radical needs is reduced to a utopian imagination. It stands as a placeholder in a society whose relentless processes of quantification have dried up all sources of alternative cultural imagination and dangerously depreciated even the reservoir of past cultural achievements. Certainly Heller refuses to consider this utopian imagination truly utopian. Her earlier writings made clear that the category of utopia is not consigned to some indefinite future but already exists in the forms of life and value preferences of small communities. She understands such communities as groups of people who choose 'to live a common way of life inspired by shared spiritual and cultural values'⁶¹. Such communities are utopian because within them relations of subordination and superordination have been lifted. They constitute elites which are neither ascetic nor socio-economically privileged. Heller also distinguishes such communities from the pressure groups of civil society. Instead, they are the anti-models of the model of infinite growth⁶². However, such a distinction raises many questions regarding the sociological weight and concreteness of this conception. Heller claims her utopian imagination already exists in alternative communities. While there can be little doubt that utopian imaginations exist, the vital question concerns their objective sociological weight. These are substantial claims but offered without much empirical evidence. Twenty years beyond the New Left and counter-culture movements, the idea that there are sociologically significant alternative communities within, and on the margins of, the existing welfare states seems little more than wishful thinking. Almost by default this accentuates the drift of the idea of radical needs towards an exclusively normative role at the cost of the sociological weight that was the basis of Marx's original hopes of immanent mass radical needs.

Conclusion-Real Needs and Utopian Radicalism

The tension in Heller's idea of radical needs expresses the uneasy resolution of the two strong motives behind her theory of needs. This Marxian inspired concept was the basis of a renewal of a contemporary humanist Marxism. It anticipated a revolutionary movement built not on the certainties of the objective laws of history but on the real qualitative needs of individuals. The modifications Heller has introduced to her concept of radical needs have all been motivated by the desire to keep faith with this original programme. The political and historical decomposition of «real socialism» compelled her to slowly and painfully extract her notion of radical needs from Marxian ideology. We have noted the two stages of this evacuation and recasting. This involved a critique of the substitutionalist political implications of the theory as initially conceived by Marx and moved on to the repudiation of the underlying philosophy of history. The upshot is the idea of radical needs loses its status as the motor of revolutionary transcendence and assumes a more normative role. Simultaneously its sociological weight increasingly comes into question. In Heller's later work, this is reflected in the changed accent of the concept. More emphasis is given to the

60 Ibid, p. 33.

61 Ibid, p. 35.

62 Ibid.

qualitative dimension of radical needs than to their unsatisfiability within the framework of capitalist society. Heller is now situated in the heart of the welfare state struggling with all its problems and its narrower options without the illusions of clear historical alternatives. The cut of her theory of needs is tailored to fit the cloth of a less ideological and more complex understanding of modernity. Yet, despite this willingness to keep pace with the dynamic of modernity and remain attuned to real needs (in this case, those of the denizens of modernity), the idea of radical needs stands as a last vestige of the original revolutionary inspiration of the theory. Shorn of its revolutionary imprimatur, radical needs function for Heller as a utopian imagination, a placeholder amidst the increasing imaginative exhaustion of modernity.

Despite her desire to articulate a critical, democratic and non-ideological theory of needs, Heller has held on stubbornly to this concept of radical needs with its weakened sociological credentials. Despite the drift towards pure normativity which, I have argued, appears to be their real status, she insists that these needs still have objective social significance. Her utopia is not the appeal to some indistinct future but to a minority consciousness within the present. Having abandoned the Marxism philosophy of history and its ideological myths, she remains committed to its underlying dialectics of deriving «ought» from «is». Confined within the parameters outlined in Section Two of this paper, she sees no risks. What distinguishes her stance from all condemned imputations of consciousness is the empirical claim that radical needs exist. Yet on this vital point there is interpretative latitude and empirical fussiness aplenty. Even if we accept Heller's reading of the small alternative communities to whom she imputes radical needs, the importance ascribed to them seems to rest on an otherwise suppressed philosophy of history⁶³. Would it not be better to acknowledge this radical imagination as nothing more than a normative construct —Heller's regulative idea— rather than persist with dubious claims to ground it sociologically? At stake here in Heller's idea of radical needs is the question of the grounding and tasks of contemporary critical philosophy. For Heller the desire to articulate real needs and to give shape to the utopian imagination are moments of a unified project. She clearly believes philosophy can and should do both. In the idea of «radical needs» dynamic social reality and utopia coincide. The result is an unapologetic dialectical philosophy. Yet for those not convinced of this ambitious project this utopian imagination seems overly burdened by its own empirical claims.

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63 Whether this is the last residue is also open to question. Although we cannot go into it here, Heller's theory of the cultural exhaustion of modernity does seem to be premised on Hegel's philosophy of history. While she explicitly rejects all philosophy of history, it seems to me that this idea of the «end of culture» may presuppose an unacknowledged philosophy of history.