

Towards a Sociology of Needs

Marx's account of human nature meets Durkheim and Freud

Andrew Simon Gilbert

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Synopsis

Of any theoretical outlook, none more than Marx's holds the concept of need so centrally. Human need, as an idea, figures heavily in his theory of alienation, his materialist conception of history and his economic analysis of capitalism. The sociological conception of needs presented in Marx's work and later elaborations offers significant insights into the way material and historical circumstances condition human nature. Marx wanted to show that beyond abstract "natural needs", human beings are essentially nothing and potentially anything. However, his diagnosis of capitalism argues that through alienation, our needs are currently constrained and disfigured. Instead, Marx prescribed communism, where production proceeds on a rational and "human" basis, and where humanity flourishes as needs become unlimited in both abundance and character. This thesis will argue that Marx and subsequent Marxists never succeeded in taking communism beyond a postulated ideal. This has led to conflicting trends within Marxism, none of which have satisfactorily grounded their prescriptions in material reality. This thesis will show how subsequent theorists, specifically Durkheim and Freud, offer powerful counter-perspectives to Marx's optimistic view of human nature. Both of these thinkers argue, in different ways, that the human subject may not be as coherent, perfectible or rational as Marx assumed.

Introduction

“All history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature” (Marx and Engels, 1846, p. 141). In his theory of history, Marx argues against notions of human nature that hold us as static, essentialized or biologically determined beings. As we transform our world, so too we transform ourselves. Utopia is possible if we build it. Marx’s concept of human needs, which I want to argue here, consists of the stuff of our culture and the motive for production, is an essential tool for understanding this transformative conception of human nature. In Marx’s account, our needs are what move us to act and think, they are the imperatives that move history. In fulfilling them we are driven to extend ourselves further, opening up new possibilities of thought and action. This creates new needs which, in turn, demand new forms of fulfilment.

Of any theoretical outlook, arguably none more than Marx’s holds the concept of needs so centrally. Perhaps Marx’s most well known description of Communist society was “to each according to his needs” (Marx, 1875, p. 347), implying a lack of correspondence between authentic human needs and distribution in capitalism. Yet Marx himself was often frustratingly indefinite about what he meant by “needs”. This thesis will reconstruct, interrogate and problematize Marx’s contribution to a sociology of needs.

How we conceive of our needs poses a fundamental question about what it means

to be human. Rooted in any concept of human need is a set of assumptions about human nature. Needs, as contrasted to wants, are objective criteria that must be met if we are to live a “good life”. While it is possible to want something that we do not need—something that may not necessarily be in our best interest, to pose something as a need implies that its necessity lies beyond purely subjective categorization, as something factual. That human beings need nourishment, warmth, health and procreation to survive as a species can hardly be disputed. To conceive of needs beyond these and to understand how these abstractions are fulfilled in the concrete and particular circumstances of human lives, however, is a more complex task.

Significant work in this field, done in the last few decades—most notably by Heller and Soper—offers pivotal insights into both the importance of “needs” in Marx, and the importance of Marx to a sociology of needs. In considering Marx’s account of needs, as well as its limitations, this thesis will utilize secondary authorities as clarifications and problematizations of Marx’s work. The argument here is that although Marx never treats the concept of needs to a systematic clarification, it is of central importance to his work as it underwrites both his conception of human nature and his corresponding materialist theory of history. Rather than attempting a comprehensive review of Marx’s use of the term “need”, the objective is to draw out some of the fundamental assumptions and limitations of Marx’s thought by focusing on how he uses, and what he means by, “needs”.

In offering a particular reading of Marx, there is no pretence here of being the final and categorical interpretation of Marx’s writing. In the case of Marx, whose depth of insight often comes from the both the diversity of perspectives employed and the flexibility of the terms he utilized, such a notion is an impossibility. As Heller puts it:

Like every other thinker of importance, he too refuses to sacrifice the *search*

for truth in various directions and along various paths on the alter of coherence. (Heller, 1976, p. 87)

Since Marx, there has been a wide variety of attempts at classifying, theorizing and problematizing the question of human needs. Maslow, as one example, devised a “hierarchy of needs” and attempted to attach objective degrees of necessity to the fulfilment of sets of human needs (Maslow, 1943, p. 371). This theory has had significant influence on both social psychology and marketing. Elsewhere, Marcuse has offered criticisms of 20th century “advanced industrial society” with reference to how “false needs” are “impressed” upon people by “forces of social domination” (Marcuse, 1964, pp. 4–5). Marcuse, like many others in the field, has offered a development of Marx’s line of thought, incorporating insights from Freud. However, rather than attempting a reconstruction of these various strands of need theory in relation to Marx’s, this thesis will remain focussed on Marx’s work. The recourse to two alternate conceptions of need—those of Durkheim and Freud—in the final chapter, rather than offering a synthesis, extension or development of Marx’s thought, provide two of the most important counter-arguments to Marx in social theory.

The scope of this thesis is as follows: In his theory of human nature, Marx rejects a positivist conception of needs that sees them as purely biological or physical in nature. Part of his contribution was the insistence that needs must be situated historically and socially, as resultant from particular economic and cultural arrangements, and not just be conceived of as a set of universal minimums (Soper, 1981, p. 10). The first chapter will therefore elucidate what Marx meant by “needs” and the role they play in his broader theoretical outlook, the materialist conception of history. Secondary literature will be utilized, alongside Marx’s work, in order to reconstitute his definition of needs, the role it plays in his conception of human nature and some of the ambiguities and assumptions within his account.

However, going beyond biological simplicities when considering needs, as Marx insists we must, immediately implies a political or normative commitment (Soper, 1981, pp. 11–12). Any such “theory of need” must ground itself in a specific concept of “the good”. If it is to insist on the objective validity of the needs it proposes—as against what is merely a “want” of the theory’s author—it must defend a set of values that pertain to such needs. Much has been written both about Marx’s theory of alienation and the role of morality within his work. What has emerged from this is a number of tensions and divergent claims over Marx’s intentions and the implications for his prescriptive agenda.

In the second chapter, Marx’s evaluation of capitalism will be assessed in regard to his theory of needs, specifically the question of alienation which itself implies that workers have historical needs that they themselves may not immediately recognize. For Marx, the need of the proletariat was communism, a social order where needs can develop unfettered. It is this projection of a future state of affairs that provides the basis for Marx’s critique of capitalism, a basis he always maintained was empirically grounded. In the second half of the chapter, Marx’s normative assumptions will be assessed on their own terms, as a force emerging within capitalism from the need of human self-realization. From here it will be found that Marx’s attempt to root communism in the materiality of capitalism was a projection. The chapter will discuss how different thinkers within Marxism have tried to grapple with these inconsistencies in Marx. This is useful in developing a clearer picture of his wider limitations.

Other political and moral allegiances correspond to different conceptions of need. It is with this in mind that the third chapter looks at two alternative conceptions of human nature, both of which contradict Marx’s in distinct ways. Durkheim, through his concept of anomie and insistence on the functional necessity of regulation, throws doubt on the desirability of communism as a utopia of unlimited need. Freud, on the

other hand, throws doubt on the concept of need itself by insisting that much of what moves us to act is irrational, primordial and usually takes place beyond our own consciousness. Both of these accounts, in different ways, offer powerful rejoinders to the utopian vision of communism in Marx and his corresponding theory of human nature.

Durkheim and Freud will both be utilized here, for the most part, as primary sources, with little recourse to secondary literature. This is for two reasons: The first is that this thesis is primarily a reconstruction and interrogation of Marx. The utilization of Durkheim and Freud in this thesis will be specifically as two significant problematizations of his thought, rather than standing as independent theoretical perspectives in their own right, as in their work. The second is the comparatively unambiguous nature of both Durkheim and Freud's writing. Rather than the diffuse laboratory of thought—spanning both published works, drafts and unpublished notebooks—that is taken from Marx, this thesis will concentrate on clearly articulated and coherently formulated theoretical approaches in their work. Secondary criticisms and clarifications of Durkheim and Freud will not, therefore, be considered.

1 The Concept of Need in Marx

The concept of need should be central to any understanding of Marx. It forms the basis of both his humanistic critique of philosophy, as set out in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and the corresponding economic critique of capitalism, which begins in the aforementioned work and reaches its zenith in *Capital*. Focusing on the more philosophical themes of Marx's work, this chapter will outline Marx's humanistic concept of need and its centrality to his conception of human nature.

As we will see in the second chapter, Marx's critique of capitalism implies a value judgement which rests on his conception of needs. The state of human fulfilment and the prioritization of alienated needs under prevailing economic conditions are essential considerations and necessary in providing the normative edge to Marx's criticisms of capitalism (Geras, 1983, pp. 84–86). However, as Heller notes, need is never given an explicit definition by Marx and throughout his work he seems to use the term inconsistently (Heller, 1976, p. 23). The objective of this chapter will therefore be to provide a reconstruction of some of the fundamental elements of Marx's philosophy, as well as integrating some observations of more recent commentators, all with specific reference to his concept of needs.

1.1 Animal and Human Beings

Our point of departure will be the conception of human “essence” offered by Marx and its relation to his concept of needs. The key to understanding this lies in the way he distinguishes human beings from other animals. For Marx, animals “are immediately one with [their] life activity” (Marx, 1844b, pp. 328–329). Their activity is “one-sided” in that they exist under the domination of immediate physical needs. Their objective is their own survival or that of their species. Beyond that, everything they do is determined by their instincts. The way animals interact with nature is immediate. Either they survive off their immediate surroundings or they perish. As Márkus puts it, “animal activity is confined and to seizing and consuming the given natural objects of needs, it directly *coincides with the process of active need-fulfilment*” (Márkus, 1978, p. 4, original emphasis).

For Marx, humans, like animals, exist both within nature—as products of natural history—and through nature, on which they must survive. Both humans and animals must make use of the external world and appropriate it as an object of them as subjects (Ollman, 1971, p. 80). However, humans, for Marx, have gone beyond animals in that they can be characterized by their ability to labour creatively and consciously¹. Hence, Marx writes:

A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs the wax. (Marx, 1867, p. 284)

Thus when humans have produced enough to free themselves from immediate physical need, they are capable of continuing to produce as an act of purposeful “*will*”. This

gives humans a “*distance* from their direct natural needs” (Mészáros, 1970, p. 209), from which humans can further develop their means of satisfying immediate needs. Unlike the “one-sided” needs of animals, human needs are “universal” in that they go beyond the immediate and consciously transform nature to better serve them. They are conscious of themselves as producers, just as they are conscious that others, both of their time and of the past or future, are capable of the same consciousness (Ollman, 1971, p. 84).

Much of the ambiguity about the basis of Marx’s conception of need specifically regards the question of whether or not a fixed set of naturally ordained, anthropological needs can be said to exist; do humans share basic biological needs with animals? While it is obvious that all humans fulfil their basic physical requirements through specific socially mediated practices, what is not so obvious is whether we can say there exists an abstract “natural man”, as Ollman puts it (Ollman, 1971, p. 79). This human, who stands outside society, is driven by purely physical requirements and possesses only “natural powers”. It is contrasted with “species man”, whose needs are constantly changing with social and economic developments. Ollman agrees with Marx when he says, in criticism of Bentham, that he “would first have to deal with human nature in general, and then as human nature as historically modified in each epoch” (Marx, 1867, p. 759). Ollman insists that any conception of human nature and any corresponding understanding of needs must begin with this separation (Ollman, 1971, p. 75).

Fromm, in agreement with this, distinguishes “*constant* or fixed [needs]... such as hunger and the sexual urge” from “*relative appetites*”. The former are a constant throughout human history, changing only in the “form” of their realization, which is specific to a given society. The later are not integral to human nature, but the product of specific economic and social circumstances (Fromm, 1961, p. 27). Likewise, Geras posits a separation between what he calls “human nature” which consists of fixed, nat-

ural needs—which humans share with animals—and “the nature of man” which he understands as socially mediated and historically specific needs (Geras, 1983, pp. 24–25).

Heller disputes whether any notion of fixed needs in human beings can be said to really exist (Heller, 1976, pp. 32). While there is certainly textual evidence within Marx that can be mobilized to support such a view, Heller maintains that the overall trend in Marx’s works is for Marx to see that *all* needs are subject to social determining and conditioning. While physical needs—such as nourishment and procreation—are universally human in the abstract sense, their specific fulfilment is always mediated by particular socio-economic and historical conditions.

For Heller, to speak of an abstracted, “natural man” is to fail to ground concepts in real existing relations. Humans such as this have never existed and never will. Instead, Heller proposes that it is better understood as the “limits of need”, or the point where the human metabolism with nature breaks down. At this point humans are no longer able to physically or mentally survive, or reproduce themselves (Heller, 1976, p. 33).

Coming from a more psychologically informed view of Marxism, Sève points out that it is necessary to make a formal distinction between two levels of need because of the difference in consequence if they are not satisfied (Sève, 1978, pp. 318–319). While historically relative needs—that pertain to cultivated senses and social phenomena—may indeed require satisfaction if the individual is to develop and experience fulfilment, the consequence of not meeting necessary “organic needs” is death. That is not to say that the content of these organic needs remains the same across history and society; they develop along-side all other needs. Nor is it to say that, taking a human life as a whole, the distinguishing of the natural from the social is not an abstraction. All aspects of human biology and society are certainly interrelated and intertwined; cul-

ture and biology have inseparably evolved together in human beings in a “dialectical totality” (Lichtman, 1990, p. 15). It is to say, however, that these basic organic needs form a “starting point” for animals and humans alike, on a level prior to any socialization of the individual (Sève, 1978, p. 315). Human infants, after all, are not born into this world with the faculty for fine dining; they require the milk of their mother’s breast, just like any mammal.

Fraser argues that we should look at different forms of needs as a dialectical unity (Fraser, 1998, p. 153). “Natural needs” are universal needs in the sense that all human beings require them to survive. They are, however, a “general abstraction” as the satisfaction of these needs takes place in culturally particular ways. In specific contexts, these become “necessary needs”, which is a “determinate abstraction”; determined by the prevailing social and cultural conditions (Fraser, 1998, p. 125–130). By defining natural needs as limits, Fraser notes, Heller effectively ignores the fact that these needs have varying levels of satisfaction, something Marx alludes to when he says:

Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth. (Marx, 1858, p. 92)

This, it is argued here, is in the spirit of Marx whether he made it explicit or not, because his theory of alienation—as we will see in the next chapter—rests on a claim that proletarian needs are reduced to this point; to a generally abstract, or “animal”, existence (Marx, 1844b, p. 327).

1.2 Needs and Production

Contrary to the life of animals, whose mode of existence changes only beyond their will and is limited by the natural environment they inhabit, humans constantly transform their relationship with nature through conscious activity. According to Marx, the “first historical act” for human beings was the creation of new needs (Marx and Engels, 1846, pp. 48–49). This was the moment that human existence ceased being determined directly by consumption of immediate nature—as animal existence is; when humans began determining their own existence through the act of production. Once humans started utilizing aspects of the natural world which had previously laid outside their immediate biological needs, these aspects became new needs; the needs of the means of production. Furthermore, as humans continue to develop the methods of production, they incorporate new aspects of nature into the process; further increasing their needs. The basis for all of this is labour: by extending nature, humans are essentially increasing the effectiveness of their labour. For Marx, the potential for the extension of human production into nature is, in the purely technological sense, limited only by nature itself.

The development of production, of humanity’s metabolism with nature, is the essence of history. Production, however, is not just determined by the level of technology attained by a specific society, it is also subject to social determinants (Márkus, 1978, p. 13). Human beings change their own nature through constant active appropriation of nature, but they do not start from nothing, they are born into social and economic circumstances that structure the way they understand the world and their ability to transform it.

The basis of any society is how it organizes production in order to satisfy its needs. This comprises of both the technological aspects of *industry*—or how nature is appro-

priated by humans in order to satisfy their needs—and *social* aspects—who is required to perform what labour, how is that labour organized and how are the products of industry distributed and exchanged (Marx, 1844b, pp. 354–355). These factors, in turn, condition the needs of humans within a prevailing mode of production. As the ways in which humans produce for their needs is subject to constant change over time, so too are the needs that they entail. For Marx, this means that the social institutions of any given epoch can never be regarded as fixed into place; human nature must be understood historically (Marx, 1847, p. 141). Hence, the central proposition of Marx and Engel’s materialist conception of history: that human history must always be understood through the differing relations of production and exchange; or in other words, the way they organize the fulfilment of needs (Marx and Engels, 1846, p. 50).

Just as productive activity is the mediation of humans with nature, it is also the mediation of humans with each other (Mészáros, 1970, p. 81). This is certainly true in the sense that in order to achieve certain tasks, humans must physically co-operate in order to succeed. In fact, unlike many animals, humans do not possess the means of survival in their own bodies and are totally dependent on others for their very existence (Lefebvre, 1968, p. 39). Perhaps more importantly though, even those who seemingly work in isolation are still engaged in social relations. Thus Marx points out that scientific research, which may not be necessarily be undertaken through “direct association with other men”, is still a social activity because all the material—the instruments, the language and the knowledge used—are all the outcome of other peoples’ labour (Marx, 1844b, p. 350).

Moreover, humans themselves are inescapably social in that they conceive of themselves and the world—unless they have existed their whole life in total isolation—within social relations. Even the very concept of an *individual* only makes sense when referenced to the social (Marx, 1858, p. 84). As Marx notes, language, which is the practical

side of consciousness, can only have arisen out of the the need to communicate with other people. Human consciousness, therefore, is a product of social relations (Marx and Engels, 1846, p. 51). Every activity human beings perform is conceived, planned and acted out in relation to the social bonds of the individual performing them. The needs of individuals are inseparable from their social context. All human needs, once beyond the purely abstract level of immediate existence, are both social in character and social in content. Therefore, any talk of the needs of an individual prior to society can be nothing more than a speculative abstraction (Kolakowski, 1978, p. 150). This is not to say that Marx considers society to have an ontological existence above and beyond human beings; this would be to reify the social nature of humans; a symptom of alienation. Rather, his point is to emphasize the social nature intrinsic to humans themselves, not as some determining entity existing external to them (Marx, 1844b, p. 350).

If co-operation is the basis of human society and productive labour is the basis of human existence, then the division of labour is what emerges as a society organizes production. For Marx, the division of labour consists of the distribution of labour tasks among members of a society. Historically, in environments such as the tropics, nature has offered such plentiful resources that humans have not been required to develop more sophisticated means of production to survive (Marx, 1867, p. 649). In temperate environments, however, where there is less plenitude of resources, humans are forced to develop productive methods out of natural necessity. As the means of production develop, new techniques, tools and organizational forms arise that make humans more productive. This necessitates the specialization of certain individuals to undertake specific tasks. The outcome of this is that humans become totally dependant on each other, and society generally, to satisfy even their most immediate needs. Under capitalist forms of manufacture, the division of labour takes on a new form inside the factory

as the labour process is divided up more and more into simplified single actions (Marx, 1867, pp. 470–471). As we will see in the second chapter, this imperative to divide labour into specific repetitive actions forms one aspect of Marx's theory of alienation.

These considerations are fundamental to the Marxist explanation of the origins of class society. Once humanity has developed sufficiently, there opens up the possibility for certain members of a society to exist without being directly involved in production. This occurs when the surplus of production is enough that they can live off the products of other peoples' labour-power. It is here, with the fulfilling of needs beyond the immediate, that the potential for human freedom begins. For Marx, this is the historical point at which the division of labour, class relations and alienation all originated (Marx and Engels, 1846, p. 54). Social and economic structures begin to appear as a force beyond human control, assigning productive roles based not on an individual's choice or will, but on the natural necessities of the prevailing mode of production itself (Ollman, 1971, p. 102). On the one hand, there arises a division of labour between mental and physical labour. The development of more complex social formations accompanies the emergence of new classes of administrators, religious figures and political leaders. With this new social division of labour, mental labour becomes as essential a need as physical labour. On the other hand, there arises the possibility of private property and ownership of means of production by individuals, rather than by the collective. When certain individuals in a society can legitimately assert the right to ownership or control of property, class society has begun (Engels, 1884, p. 150).

In this conception of history, needs are regarded in a positive rather than negative sense (Sayers, 1998, p. 164). Rather than seeing a need as symptomatic of "suffering a lack", Marx sees the expansion of needs that coincides with advances in production, globalization and growing interdependence of human beings as an "enriching" of the human species (Marx, 1858, p. 409). For him, needs, when satisfied, do not cease;

rather, they are the impetus for the creation of new needs. History, in this sense, is “a dialectic of needs and productive powers in which each develops in relation to the other” (Sayers, 1998, p. 157). As we will see in the next chapter, Marx envisions a future ideal state where human beings are “rich in needs” and the interdependence and co-operation of the species has become global (Marx, 1858, p. 409).

1.3 Needs and Species Being

From the vantage point of understanding the anthropology of needs, their social content and character, and their connection to the division of labour, it becomes clearer what Marx means when he describes the “species-being” of humans: the human essence which transcends the limitations of necessity and becomes free to develop to the full potential of human nature. With the development of production, and corresponding social developments, humans are able to realize their potentiality in ways that were hitherto unfathomable. This not only raises the productivity of the humans species, giving the impetus for population growth, but it creates new needs which demand satisfaction. For Marx, human potentiality is limited only by the prevailing socio-economic conditions (Marx, 1844b, p. 329). Thus history is conceived as an unfolding of human potentiality, reaching its culmination in communism. For just as more sophisticated modes of production mean the realization of new potentials, they also place new fetters on the development of humans and their ability to realize their full potential.

Humans are not limited to fulfilling the needs required by the productive process. While production develops, human needs become less and less focused on pure utility (Márkus, 1978, pp. 11–12). As humans are conscious of their activity in ways animals are not, they are capable of contemplation beyond the limits of their immediate needs. Humans are instead “universal”, they are potentially capable of contemplating

the whole of nature, whether or not they need to. This gives humans great creative power.

By achieving a degree of separation between their immediate needs and the objects of labour, humans necessitate intellectual development. This entails not only changes in the way they manipulate nature, but the transformation and development of human beings themselves. Developments in the methods of production, specialization within the division of labour and a broadening of understanding of natural laws all demand the development of different skills. Moreover, as skills develop, becoming more and more distant from satisfying immediate needs, they cease to be focused on necessary production alone and start to become orientated to objects for their own sake (Márkus, 1978, p. 29–33). This capability is unique to human beings, as an aspect of their “species-being”; a potential of their essential nature.

In this way, humans change their own nature and achieve what Marx saw as “higher” modes of being. Human nature is not fixed for Marx, we “must learn to see, hear, think, etc.” (Márkus, 1978, p. 23, 29). This is done through the existing “social consciousness” into which all are born. Language, labour and other social institutions stamp fixed meanings onto the real world, which conscious and active individuals must make use of just as they are limited by them. As they do this they reproduce, transmit and develop those meanings. Through conscious contemplation, which in of itself, is an appropriation of nature, “human senses” arise, which become “theoreticians” of objects for their own sake. In other words, creative activity becomes an end in itself, and not just a means to expand production. As Márkus (1978, p. 31) puts it: “the development of senses is the labour of the previous history of the world”. As far back as pre-history, humans have cultivated an artistic sense. This, however, continues to develop over successive periods, so that the forms of art we conceive of now, and appreciate as art, would have been completely alien to people with a different historical perspective.

This is what Marx means when he says that throughout history we can see the constant development of new, socially developed, “human senses” which have needs all of their own (Marx, 1844b, p. 352). The “species-being” of humanity is capable of full appropriation of nature, not just the direct survival of the human as a biological entity, but this must come after the satisfaction of abstract needs:

For a man who is starving the human form of food does not exist, only its abstract form exists; it could just as be present in its crudest form, and it would be hard to say how this way of eating differs from that of animals.... [T]hus the objectification of the human essence, in a theoretical as well as a practical respect, is necessary both in order to make man's *senses human* and to create an appropriate *human sense* for the whole of the wealth of humanity and nature. (Marx, 1844b, pp. 353–354, original emphasis)

All this has epistemological consequences (Márkus, 1978, p. 34). If human beings are universal, and their needs are open and limited only by nature itself, it follows that humans are capable of a full appreciation of the world as it is. Unlike animals, humans can see beyond their immediate needs and are capable of striving for an objective understanding of the world. The possibility for the representation and symbolization of material reality, thus the incorporation of it into systems of meaning, is potentially unlimited. The development of higher needs and the cultivation of human senses depend on the satisfaction level of the abstract needs of the human organism. Culture and thought, for Marx, are subject to material determination. Up until now, however, this total objectivity has yet to be achieved. We are limited, not by the essential nature of human beings, but by the social formations in which they exist. This consideration is a fundamental aspect of Marx's critique of capitalism.

2 Needs and Capitalism

For Marx, capitalism heralds the moment when humanity has reached a level of productive capability that goes so far beyond immediate physical needs as to render them a concern of the past² (Heller, 1976, p. 32). Once people are able to stop fulfilling their immediate physical needs they are free to fulfil their other, cultivated needs; needs that pertain to “human senses”. Instead of the “nature-idolatry” that dominated previous productive modes, “the great civilizing influence of capital” means that:

[F]or the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognized as a power for itself; and the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production. (Marx, 1858, pp. 409–410)

According to Marx, the productive capability of capitalism shows that for the first time in human history the fulfilment of the entire human population is possible; not just in the immediate sense, but in the sense of a free and limitless subjectivity. What prevents this, however, is the structure of capitalism itself. In applying his account of human nature specifically to capitalism, Marx formed his theory of alienation (Ollman, 1971, p. 244).

In the previous chapter we saw how, according to Marx, humans must produce in order to exist. In doing so they continually transform their needs and therefore their nature. In this chapter we will continue to draw on Marx and secondary commentators in reconstructing his sociology of needs; now with reference to his critique of capitalism, his theory of alienation and the goal of communism. Once this is done, we can consider some of the apparent difficulties in Marx's diagnosis and prescription for capitalist society.

2.1 Estranged Needs

When humans produce, they create a relation between themselves and the object of their production, “placing their life in the object” (Marx, 1844b, p. 324). Implicitly, whoever eventually uses that object forms a social relation to the worker who originally produced it. Under capitalism, however, the object being produced is not under the control of the producer themselves, nor it is owned by her, rather it is the property of a capitalist. This is the basis of class relations, “with which society is split into the two classes of *property owners* and *propertyless workers*” (Marx, 1844b, p. 322). The capitalist is not interested in an object as far as it is humanly useful, rather the capitalist seeks to exchange objects on the market, in order to valorise his capital. It is here that Marx distinguishes between two forms of value, *use-value*—which is only realized once humans employ an object to satisfy a specific human need, and *exchange value*—which is the numerical equivalence of that product, realized once an object is sold or exchanged (Marx, 1867, pp. 131–132). Hence, Marx describes use-value as a “qualitative” measure and exchange value as “quantitative”.

The ownership of both productive means and productive ends by a capitalist, who only sees them as an embodiment of exchange value, is the central tenet

for Marx's theory of alienation and the basis from which all other forms of alienation spring (Marx, 1844b, pp. 326–327). The structure of capitalism forces workers to enter into relations with owners of capital in order to sell their labour for a wage. From the point of view of both the capitalist and the worker, this relationship is based purely on exchange. The capitalist considers the worker to be just another commodity within the process of production, performing a task necessary in order to obtain profit. The worker sees their labour as merely something they must perform in order to receive a wage, on which they depend to survive (Marx, 1844b, p. 328).

Capitalism is alienating in various ways, both for the worker and the capitalist. With the reduction of all relations to exchange, workers are alienated from both their productive activity and the object of their production. Instead of producing something which is humanly useful, labour, for the worker, produces only the wages required for survival (Marx, 1844b, pp. 326, 329). Thus what Marx regards as a fundamental needs for human beings, the need to labour, is turned into an intolerable burden. Instead of taking pleasure in the creative appropriation of nature, workers' lives are subsumed by processes of industrial production completely out of their control. Activity of the mind is divorced from practice, just as labour is reduced to monotonous and repetitive tasks (Sayers, 1998, p. 29). What should be regarded as an end in itself, the production of a use value that corresponds to a need, is instead a means for the valorisation of capital. In the same sense, the worker, who is put into action as an instrument in the process of production, becomes a means for the accumulation of surplus value for the capitalist; the satisfaction of the capitalist's alienated need for accumulated quantitative wealth (Heller, 1976, p. 48). Human needs, which are reflections of objects which are socially useful, are manifest under capitalism as "egoistic needs", which reflect the interests of atomized individuals (Marx, 1844c, p. 269).

This relates to another point of Marx's about the alienation of humans from other

humans (Marx, 1844b, pp. 329–330). As commodities are produced purely for exchange value, with their realization as useful objects subject to the mediation of the market, workers are alienated from human relations embodied in objects they produce. Commodities are only exchangeable as long as they fulfil a human need, which, for Marx, entails a social relation between the producer and the consumer. However, as workers only engage in production as a means of gaining exchangeable value, on which they depend for survival, this relation is alienated. What is in essence a relation between human beings instead appears as “the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx, 1867, p. 165). Furthermore, the relation between the worker and the capitalist is one of mutual antagonism—workers desire higher wages, which would reduce the surplus of value capitalists profit from, and capitalists desire more surplus, which can only be achieved by lowering wages and immiserating the worker. Finally, workers are alienated from their species, because the “species character” of man, being free and conscious activity, is denied (Marx, 1844b, pp. 327–328). Workers are unable to find their labour a fulfilling and purposeful activity, instead they act in the manner any other animal would, producing to satisfy their natural needs; the necessities of immediate survival.

For Marx, capitalism turns human needs back on themselves. “Estranged labour reverses the relationship so that man, just because he is a conscious being, makes his life activity, his *being*, a mere means for his existence” (Marx, 1844b, p. 328). With the alienation of labour, the worker only feels free in the fulfilment of her “animal functions”; eating, drinking and procreating. As Marx remarks, however, these functions are still “genuine human functions” in that they take place through the mediation of historical and social developments. However, once they are separated from the main-spring of human activity, productive labour in the workplace, they are “abstracted... and turned into final exclusive ends, [thus] they are animal” (Marx, 1844b, p. 327).

The result is that the “[p]roduct of labour confronts the worker as something hostile and alien” (Marx, 1844b, p. 324). The more labour performed, the more powerful the alien, objective world of capital becomes. As workers create the means of production, just as they create all commodities, the more they work, the less the external world belongs to them and the more it belongs to the capitalist. As John Rees puts it, “the most characteristic feature of human beings, their ability to transform the world around them, is turned into its opposite, a system that escapes the control of those who live under it” (Rees, 1998, p. 87).

The implication is that how the world appears, both to workers and capitalists, is different to the processes actually under-way, making human consciousness distorted and prone to only a partial view of the world. The processes of capitalism appear as immutable and overwhelming forces, which dictate both the existence of the worker and capitalist. For Marx, this is only an appearance. The dynamic of capitalism is just one in a long line of stages of human history, the culmination of which will be communism. This division between appearance and essence forms an fundamental component of Marx’s theoretical critique of both political economy and philosophy.

2.2 Alienation and Philosophy

For political economists, “alienation” has a positive value (Mészáros, 1970, p. 35). The bourgeois concepts of freedom, liberty and equality all, in essence, rest on the notion. The voluntary alienability of every person from the bonds of the feudal order and the alienability of all things—especially land—from tradition became the key objective of 18th and 19th century bourgeois reformers and the crowning achievement of bourgeois revolutions. Primitive accumulation effectively freed the worker from feudal bondage and made their labour freely exchangeable on the market (Heller, 1976,

p. 82). The contractual form, which replaced feudal servitude, emphasized the freedom of individuals to enter into economic relations with others for a duration of their own choosing. Universal saleability meant that all products are equally available to everyone, should they choose to buy them.

As Heller explains, however, freedom under capitalism is a deeply contradictory notion. As we have seen, the working class has the right, under bourgeois law, to enter into contractual arrangements of their own choosing. This freedom, however, transforms into its opposite once we consider that the worker has no choice but to work. To do otherwise would mean the worker is deprived of a wage and unable to satisfy even the most necessary needs for survival. It would mean starvation. Hence, freedom and necessity, under capitalism, are antinomic (Heller, 1976, p. 82). For Marx, it is contradictions like these that allow human consciousness to perceive alternatives to capitalism.

Resulting in the abstract bourgeois notions mentioned above, philosophers and political economists of the Enlightenment attempted to devise theories of universal human nature in terms of the conditions they saw present in their own societies (Mészáros, 1970, p. 36). Often, they insisted that competition and greed were trans-historical human attributes, with capitalism being the highest form of their expression. Otherwise they generally held that human nature had gone through changes, creating different needs and necessitating corresponding developments in production, capitalism corresponding the current nature of humanity (Soper, 1981, pp. 46–47). As we have seen, Marx reversed this by insisting that it is human nature that undergoes change in response to developments in the mode of production.

In Marx's account, needs and their objects determine the interpretable limits of reality for human beings; just as "social existence determines... consciousness" (Marx,

1859, p. 425). If human needs are alienated and instead manifest as alienated egoistic needs, thinkers operating within the prevailing conditions of private property are unable to see past them and are thus philosophically impoverished (Heller, 1976, p. 47). Thought, just like the products of human labour, becomes estranged from social relations and is “fetishized into a thing-in-itself”, losing any sense of how it reflects material existence (Eagleton, 1991, p. 70). Only a historical view, which is able to see beyond appearance of stasis, to the fact of constant change, is able to recognize that the current order of things is only a moment in a process of endless change. This view becomes possible when economic contradictions disrupt the *status-quo* and bring upon crises, both economic and social.

[I]f... theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc. comes into contradiction with the existing relations, this can only occur because existing social relations have come into contradiction with existing forces of production.
(Marx and Engels, 1846, p. 52)

Once these contradictions are manifest, needs begin to arise which are not satisfiable within the existing economic and social arrangements. Hitherto self-evident truths become untenable, generating new critical questions and perspectives on human existence (Mészáros, 1970, p. 37). According to Marx, this process was nascent in the Political Economy of Smith and Ricardo, reached its philosophical culmination in the dialectical systems of Hegel, before being grounded—now as proletarian rather than bourgeois criticism—in material reality by Marx himself (Korsch, 1938, p. 60, 65).

2.3 Communism as Radical Need

Perhaps characteristically, there is more than one image of communism presented in the writings of Marx which are not altogether consistent (Beilharz, 1992, p. 7). Rather than attempting to reformulate or synthesize these contradictory visions, this section will proceed by exploring how the preceding discussion of needs relates to Marx's estimation of communism. The objective is an exposition of his concept of need based on some observations of his thoughts on communism, rather than the other way around.

For Marx, capitalism is paradoxically the highest form of development so far achieved by humanity. Through the advanced division of labour and the acceleration of production, the human species has achieved a level of dominance over nature that renders the natural limitations of the past obsolete (Heller, 1976, p. 46). In this respect, it has enriched the species to hitherto unfathomable levels. For the worker, however, capitalism offers only the most unfulfilling of existences. Just as capitalism enriches the species, it impoverishes the individual worker and robs them of their species-being. It creates the greatest demand of human needs, while failing to supply any of their objects except in one-sided and alienated ways (Heller, 1976, pp. 47–48).

Marx saw communism as the transcendence of all these limitations. Unlike the utopias of romantics, Marx does not envision man going backward to a simpler, more primal state of being, returned to some pristine state of nature (Kolakowski, 1978, p. 411). Marx's vision of communism is quite the opposite; the unleashing of man's full creative potential and the full appropriation of nature, both as external objects and as internal human potential. In common with romantic conceptions of human nature, however, under communism, with the dissolution of alienation and the correspondence of appearances with essences, the needs of the individual become inseparable from the needs of all (Heller, 1976, p. 125).

It is in this sense that communism itself is cast by Marx a “radical need” (Marx, 1844a, p. 252). As Marx views all *human needs* as value relations, but not ones that are quantifiable, these cannot be satisfied in a social configuration that only develops needs quantitatively, seeing the valorisation of capital as the primary need (Heller, 1976, p. 51). Capitalism produces its own “grave-diggers” in the proletariat—the working class as collective radical subject—insofar as producers must overturn the system of needs in capitalism to express their humanness—which can only be realized through the direct satisfaction of qualitative needs (Heller, 1976, p. 90–91). This conception of revolution is not conceived as a result of the “class interests” of workers in terms of the quantity of wealth they receive—that is to say, it does not arise out of the disparity between the wages of the worker and the wealth of the capitalist. Rather, it is the assertion of humanness from the proletariat; the attempt to overcome the alienation of capitalism and realize their full human potential. Capitalism therefore inherently and inevitably gives rise to these “radical needs” (Heller, 1976, p. 76), but their satisfaction entails communism.

According to Marx, under communism humans will be able to fully appropriate all of nature, becoming masters of their “inorganic body” (Marx, 1844b, p. 328). Needs in capitalist society remain partial, while in communism they will become universal, with humanity finally able to “appropriate [its] total essence, whole man” (Ollman, 1971, p. 93). Moreover, the divisions that characterize bourgeois society—those of class and the alienation of productive activity—will dissolve. What will be left will be a completely restructured human psyche, a total transformation away from the human personality of capitalism and a universal conformity with the full spirit of the human species-being. Instead of humans one-sided creatures of want, they emerge as being “*in need of a totality of vital human expression*”, which, for Marx, meant the fulfilment of the full potential of their nature (Marx, 1844b, p. 356, original emphasis). They be-

come “rich in needs” (Marx, 1858, p. 409).

With the unlimited correspondence between nature and needs, the telos of human self-realization is achieved: humans attain complete realization of their species-being and the possibility for full appropriation of nature³. “The development of each... becomes the condition of the development of all” (Eagleton, 2009, p. 307). The absence of alienation, transparent social relations, the abolition of commodity exchange, and the end of private accumulation will mean individuals will share all their needs and morals unambiguously in common (Heller, 1976, pp. 125–139). With the abolition of the division between appearances and essences, so too will the social sciences disappear. In communism, the “riddle of history” is solved (Marx, 1844b, p. 348).

2.4 Not “Ought” But “Is”?

Or is it? As Kamenka says, Marx always “prided himself that he had not asked what *ought* to be, but only what *is*” (Kamenka, 1962, p. 1). As Marx also said himself, “[t]heory is only realized in a people only in so far as it is a realization of people’s needs” (Marx, 1844a, p. 252). However, there are problems here. If human needs are historically and socially relative, how can Marx offer a criticism of capitalism based on their limitation? It is easy to see how a social form could be universally criticized for not meeting the basic needs of the human organism—as is certainly the case for much of the world under capitalism, but this is not what Marx just does. As Heller shows, Marx wants to place communism within capitalism as an empirical fact; the “radical need” of the proletariat. Capitalism can then be found inadequate from the vantage point of a future communist human who is “rich in needs”; needs which are currently estranged or one-sided. However, as Heller makes clear, this is a “philosophical construct” (Heller, 1976, p. 47). Therefore, how can it be said to be of any use in condemning the prevailing

conditions from a purely material basis? The strain of moral condemnation in Marx, against the dehumanization of capitalism, has raised a number of questions about the relationship between Marxism, morality and its basis in actuality. Marxists continue to struggle with these questions today. While it is not possible to be comprehensive, a brief survey will benefit our purposes here.

A source of tension lies between seeing that we cannot pass moral judgements on the actions of people from different social or historical contexts to us, and trying to find a foothold from which capitalism can be evaluated. Taking the view that morals are totally relative to social, historical and economic context effectively means that from within capitalism, we are unable to criticize it. As Sayers notes, “on this account, the prevailing order is ‘just’ and ‘right’ by definition” (Sayers, 1998, p. 113). Thus in capitalism, the wage relation can only be deemed as just. An injustice only occurs if it is in contradiction with the prevailing mode of production.

An action, transaction or system of distribution is just whenever it is functional in relation to that mode of production, unjust whenever it is dysfunctional. Given such a conception of justice, it is no longer surprising that capitalist distribution and the relation between capitalists and workers turn out to be just. (Wood, 1984, p. 9)

According to some accounts, this is just the position Marx held. They insist that Marx’s condemnation of capitalism comes not from his deeming it as a case of injustice—such notions *are* specific to social context—but from the transcendental absolute values of “self-realization” and “emancipation”. In this sense, Marx splits morality into those aspects that are historically relative, and those which are trans-historical absolutes. Concepts of justice and right are products of social conditions, thus not applicable outside those specific circumstances. Hence, in no way can capitalism be deemed unjust. Hu-

man needs, whose fulfilment is bound up with the transcendence of alienation appear outside of society and history, as “self-realization”. Capitalism, from this perspective, can therefore be condemned for denying these needs (Lukes, 1985, p. 29).

Another approach acknowledges the moralistic tone in much of Marx’s writing and instead insists that he was inconsistent or contradictory (Gilbert, 1981, p. 200). Thus it is maintained that Marx did in fact consider private property and ownership of the means of production to be essentially unjust. Geras claims that even though Marx claimed to propound a value-free and scientific analysis of capitalism, he did, in fact, maintain “a commitment to independent and transcendent standards of justice”, and in fact “denied” or “repressed” it (Geras, 1985, pp. 58, 85).

In either of these cases, Marx cannot really be said to have gone beyond a morality based on “Ought”. By bringing in such absolutes on which to hang his criticism of capitalism, Marx is effectively “impos[ing]... moral dogma... as an eternal, ultimate and forever immutable moral law”, as Engels put it. Thus it is inconsistent with his immediately subsequent claim that himself and Marx,

maintain on the contrary, that all former moral theories are the product, in the last analysis, of the economic stage which society had reached at that particular epoch. (Engels, 1878, p. 109)

For Sayers, this ambiguity about the moral position of Marx is due to the lack of dialectical understanding characteristic of analytical philosophers. The result is the treatment of Marx’s social theory and political outlook as separable and attempts “to interpret them from within a framework of rigid and exclusive dichotomies” (Sayers, 1998, p. 112–113). This results in a binary choice between only two possible alternatives: “pure relativism or moral absolutism”.

Instead Sayers insists that Marx took not “a moral approach to history; but a his-

torical approach to morality” (Sayers, 1998, p. 116–125). Rather than seeing society as a “monolithic and homogeneous structure”, separated from other historical social formations by a “metaphysical wall”, Sayers claims that Marx’s morality is bound up with the “distinct needs, desires and interests” of the proletariat. “He (Marx) criticizes capitalism... because it fails to meet the needs that it itself has created” (Sayers, 1998, p. 134). Therefore, according to Sayers, morality is not an illusion in Marx, nor does it consist of absolute values, rather it emerges from within capitalism itself as a material force; that of the revolutionary proletariat. It is relative, in that it is borne out of a specific class position and located within a historically specific mode of production. The choice Marx makes, to side with the proletariat, says Sayers, is a result of his theory of progress. This involves the essentially Hegelian view that humanity proceeds through stages, each one negated by the next through a process of internal contradiction, attaining higher and higher forms. Communism, as the consciousness of the revolutionary proletariat, contains the moral outlook of the next society. This society goes beyond class interests, as proletarian struggle amounts to the universal liberation of all humanity from conditions of alienation.

This account seems to accord best with Marx’s intentions, as he always maintained that capitalism is just a transitory stage in human society, a step on the road to a fuller realization of human potential. In this sense, not only does Marx’s work attempt to serve as an imminent critique of capitalism from the perspective of a future society already developing within the old, but also as a “practical guide” for the agents of revolutionary change (Korsch, 1938, pp. 22–23). The prospect of an objective assessment, standing outside of a given social order—such as the static and detached doctrines of positivist sociology—is chimerical to Marx. All critique must be embedded within actual relations and subjectivities (McLellan, 1975, pp. 39, 42). All ideas are carried by specific histories (Korsch, 1938, pp. 43, 72, 86). The universal ideal of communism

is carried by the specific exploitation and alienation of the proletariat. For Marx, it is from here where capitalism must be judged.

However, this immediately raises the following questions: Is communism *really* derived from the struggles of the working class? Is Marxism *really* the theoretical expression of the proletariat's "needs, desires and interests"? Does Marx empirically locate his vision for a classless society in the reality of capitalist society, or is it a projection? In other words, how legitimate is Marx's claim that assessing capitalism from the assumed standpoint of communism does not involve any trace of idealism? Here it is necessary to assess Marx against his own goal:

Just as one cannot judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge... a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life. (Marx, 1859, p. 462)

2.5 Two Visions of Revolution

Heller identifies two contradictory ways with which Marx attempts to place the "Ought" of communism—in other words, his theory of revolution—within the material life of capitalism (Heller, 1976, p. 74). The first, as we have seen, presents communism as the radical need of the collective subject, the alienated working class. The other, so called "vulgar" account downplays the freedom of human subjectivity, instead suggesting historical necessity. Marx himself never explicitly identified or confronted this tension within his work, but it has since become the basis of a significant division of principle within Marxism generally (Soper, 1981, p. 34). The preceding discussion has largely elucidated the first such view; the following will briefly outline some important

aspects of the second.

In a preface the first volume of *Capital*, Marx speaks of “social antagonisms that spring from the natural laws of capitalist production”, laws, he says, which “[work] themselves out with iron necessity” (Marx, 1867, p. 91). Elsewhere, Marx describes the way “the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production” (Marx, 1859, p. 425). For Heller, this notion is derived, by Marx, from the Hegelian dialectical concept of the “negation of the negation”. Effectively, what Marx is saying, is that it is an inevitability in any given economic formation that the material forces of production will develop to the point where they are no longer compatible with the ruling ideas that originally arose from them. Once this occurs, revolution will be necessary in order to bring the social relations and the economic forces of society back into alignment. Under capitalism, this is realized by the socialization of production through the modern system of manufacture. It occurs once socialization has reached the limit whereby the only possible forward advancement of productive forces—the only possible way to further expand the division of labour—requires complete centralization of means of production. The economic base of capitalism has thus come into contradiction with the rights of private property which are fundamental to its existence (Heller, 1976, pp. 77–79). The only alternatives beyond this point becomes the revolutionary overthrow of the existing relations by the proletariat or the collapse of the capitalist system through internal crises of contradiction, resulting in “the common ruin of the contending classes” (Marx and Engels, 1848, p. 68).

By casting revolution this way, Marx leaves himself open to the familiar charge of economic determinism. Communism, in this account, is not the result of human will, of the conscious activity of human beings, but rather the inevitable outcome of immutable natural laws that determine the path of history. Heller contends that it is an error, even from within Marxism, to describe such a process as that of natural

law (Heller, 1976, p. 80). The developments of capitalism only seem natural and immutable because they are the result of the alienation of relations between people and the fetishization of the commodity form. For her, a more feasible account of communism must approach it as a “total social revolution”, not as an economic necessity. Moreover, this account of revolution is especially problematic because in the most advanced capitalist economies, the developments Marx identified have so far shown little indication of fulfilling his predictions. It thus appears “at best, on the analogy of an unreliable train schedule” (Márkus, 1978, p. 52). Regimes that have so far pursued a nominal Marxism as a practical political program have characteristically done so more as an alternative development path to that of western style capitalism, rather than as an end result of its internal contradictions (Amin, 2011, pp. 4–5). As an outcome of blind historical forces, communism still remains a theoretical postulate in the minds of Marxists.

The deterministic thread of Marxism also has implications for the theory of need. This line of reasoning was, perhaps, most fully developed by Althusser, who insisted on an “epistemological break” between the humanism of the young “Hegelian” Marx and the structuralism of the older Marx⁴. Althusser claims that while many terms remained in use throughout Marx’s work, their meanings underwent radical transformation (Althusser, 1969, pp. 28, 244). He contends that after an initial humanist phase, which encompasses the writings on alienation in 1844, Marx sought to empty his theory of all normative and evaluative content, concentrating instead on a purely scientific approach to the problems of capitalism. The result is that any theory of human nature is cast aside, and along with it goes the concept of alienation—which is Marx’s anthropology applied to capitalism—and thus any conception of human need that goes beyond the purely economic or structural. The prospect of an intrinsic human need for self-realization is therefore a remnant of Marx’s early idealism which was later rejected

and replaced with an understanding of need as purely “determination... by the forms of production” (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, pp. 165–167). In this sense, needs are evoked purely by economic and productive developments which create the demand for products, and not from any essentialist notion of unfulfilled human potential. Human beings, therefore, effectively become the bearers of historical forces; blank slates ready to be assigned their needs by history, with notions of autonomy and free will just functioning as a comforting illusions (Eagleton, 2007, p. 90). Putting aside questions of philological accuracy, as Soper notes, this conception of need is flawed: such a deterministic conception of need implies a homogeneity of needs which does not exist (Soper, 1981, pp. 49–51). Moreover, it is difficult to see how, in this outlook, people can ever subjectively feel their needs to be unfulfilled.

Whichever way he conceived of revolution, Marx remained, throughout his life, committed to the concept of the proletariat as the agent of change. Marx may have claimed to derive this concept from empirical evidence, but as Lovell shows, Marx’s proletariat started out as a philosophical speculation; a construct within a Hegelian philosophical system which strives for the full realization of a universal “human” essence as opposed to the particular and alienated interests of the bourgeoisie (Lovell, 1988, p. 17, 104). As Marx later attempted to explain why his initial predictions had not been fulfilled—why the revolutionary subject had failed to materialize, the humanistic philosophical conception of an estranged proletariat with “radical needs” became overshadowed by the proletariat as a historically determined economic category.

While he never abandoned a moral critique of capitalism as dehumanizing, through political economy the later Marx sought to ground his earlier speculative abstractions in material reality, pointing to the growing industrial working class as the bearers of the communism—due to their communal working conditions and their particular location at the point of production. Rather than the full expression of the species-being

through unalienated labour, the task becomes the freeing of productive forces from the limiting imperatives of capitalism and their utilization for universally beneficial ends: “a technological and automated economy *outside* which humans might seek their fullest development” (Beilharz, 1992, p. 9, my emphasis). The division of labour is rationally rearranged, with automated machines performing the necessary labour for human subsistence, labour which Marx now sees as ideally avoided. Human “self-emancipation gives way to the idea of economic progress and the proletariat as the class of economic rationality” (Lovell, 1988, p. 39, 218, 221).

In the end, neither account of Marx’s revolutionary subject can be said to be empirically grounded. Far from being revolutionary agents of universal self-realization or technical rationality, the political activity of the Western industrial working class has largely been concerned with pursuing their particular sectional interests through negotiations within existing economic and political structures. This evident failure of Marx’s predictions has preoccupied Marxists ever since his day and led to “ever more elaborate theories, chiefly to explain the quiescence of the working class” (Lovell, 1988, p. 223). Sayers effectively asks us to accept the “faith of socialism”, as “one cannot point to the actual existence” of it at present (Sayers, 1998, p. 148). However, this just seems to be an admission of its immateriality. After all, Marx himself said:

[I]f we did not find concealed in society as it is the material conditions of production and the corresponding relations of exchange prerequisite for a classless society, then all attempts to explode it would be quixotic. (Marx, 1858, p. 159)

Despite the best of efforts, Marx’s vision of communism and critique of capitalism cannot be unproblematically reconciled with a view of history that places material conditions at its centre. Throughout his entire work the vision for an utopian future, rather

than being empirically derived from the facts of his day, begins with and rests upon metaphysical and teleological speculations about progress and human nature (Springborg, 1981, pp. 105–108). As self-described Marxist Sayers himself puts it, “Marxism involves a humanist critique of capitalism based on a moral ideal of self-realization” (Sayers, 1998, p. 9). An ideal worth fighting for? Perhaps. But an ideal nonetheless.

3 Other Anthropologies

Marx's radical program encounters further complications when it comes up against alternate conceptions of human nature. This chapter will attempt brief elucidations of the theme of need and the corresponding questions of human nature in the works of Durkheim and Freud. These comparisons are useful, I argue, because as Nisbet says:

Durkheim shares with Freud a large part of the responsibility for turning contemporary social thought from the classic rationalist categories of volition, will and individual consciousness to aspects which are, in a strict sense, non-volitional and non-rational. (Nisbet, 1966, p. 82)

This diminishing of free and rational will in human beings runs contrary to the optimistic assumptions of human nature in Marx. It is in this sense that the preceding reconstruction of Marx can be problematized. In Durkheim and Freud, needs are presented negatively, as complications and barriers to freedom and fulfilment, rather than the unleashing of our innate potential.

The choices of terminology between the thinkers here are telling. While Marx emphasizes the centrality of “needs”, Freud emphasizes the centrality of “instincts” or “drives”. Ultimately, as we will see, these choices come down to assumptions about the scope of possibility for human action. While needs are there to be satisfied—implying

a known connection with an object, instincts lurk deep within us, out of our grasp and often escaping comprehension. In the case of Durkheim, “need” as a term is present, but it is not a concept with a specific philosophical meaning. Durkheim uses it interchangeably with desire, want and similar terms. Ultimately, as we will see, what matters for Durkheim is that which drives human beings to act is socially functional, clearly defined and realistically achievable. This, in of itself, offers an interesting contrast to Marx.

Durkheim at one point criticizes Marx directly, for not deriving conclusions from observation, but rather searching for empirical evidence to support preconceived doctrines (Durkheim, 1972, pp. 156–157). This is a serious criticism of Marx’s methods and his conclusions. However, of deeper interest here is Durkheim’s anthropology and how it offers contrasting picture to that of Marx.

3.1 Durkheim: Needs and Regulations

For Durkheim, like Marx, human needs are only limited in potential by prevailing social conditions. According to Durkheim, unlike animals, for whom needs correspond directly to bodily requirements, human beings possess a level of intelligence that allows them to go beyond a purely biological existence (Durkheim, 1897, pp. 206–207). Furthermore, animals’ needs consist of only replacing the energy consumed by their physical activity. Once this is fulfilled, the animal “asks for nothing further”. What results is a natural equilibrium whereby the animal lives by satisfying needs as and when they arise, living in direct dependence on immediately available natural conditions. Human beings, on the contrary, have gone beyond this direct relationship with nature by creating new needs for themselves. As the capability for humanity to produce increases, so do their needs. At the same time, these needs become more complex and

less calculable. Hence, Durkheim notes that while it may be possible to come up with a quantified value for the material needs of animal's "physical maintenance", this is difficult with human beings due to the disrupting mediation of culture and the will of human individuals.

In the same way that Marx insists that all needs have an object, Durkheim states that all needs must relate to the means to fulfil them. Where Marx and Durkheim differ is on the consequences of this. For Durkheim, modernity is characterized by an unprecedented expansion of production and the corresponding growth of the division of labour, which breaks through the culturally assigned limitations of previous social formations (Durkheim, 1972, pp. 178, 185). Whereas in previous social forms, production and consumption occurred in close spatial and temporal relation to each other, in modernity the division of labour has expanded across nations and the globe (Durkheim, 1897, p. 216). The result is that for the individual, the connection between consumption and production, and thus the meaning of both, has become obscured.

The vision of a human being, "rich in needs", does not evoke the same emancipatory image in Durkheim that it does in Marx. Durkheim argues that in traditional social forms the close proximity of production and consumption gives individuals a better understanding of productive processes and their role within them. However, in modern societies the distance and obscurity of the connection means that production and consumption appear potentially limitless. Thus needs, and the means to their satisfaction, can potentially become unlimited. The result is individuals who extend their needs indefinitely. For Marx, expanding needs are synonymous with social progress and growing human potentiality, while for Durkheim, if unchecked, they become a root cause of social pathology (Durkheim, 1972, p. 173). If needs are unlimited, they soon lose all meaning and possibility of satisfaction. Needs become a "bottomless abyss", whereby their infinite character just becomes the inevitability of unfulfillment

(Durkheim, 1897, pp. 208–209). Needs that are unlimited are unsatisfiable and goalless by definition, and without comprehensible and achievable goals, human action quickly becomes meaningless. As Durkheim puts it:

[O]ne does not advance when one walks toward no goal, or—which is the same thing—when his goal is infinity. (Durkheim, 1897, p. 208)

The failure to meet these infinite needs becomes the source of “perpetual unhappiness”, a state of “anomie”⁵. Life becomes a “torment”, because there exists no fixed point at which one can say their needs have been fulfilled. What exists instead is a wearying pursuit of goals that are forever formless and beyond reach. The outcome is that the meaning of life itself, and thus the need to keep living it, comes into question. This is reflected in a rise in the rate of a particular category of suicide, “anomic suicide” (Durkheim, 1897, p. 219).

The problem affecting contemporary society is that when the “imaginary wall” that is the moral order does not correspond to the prevailing social conditions, it is fundamentally weakened and prone to human passions “pour[ing] through the breach” (Durkheim, 1972, p. 173). By becoming freed from all limitations, human beings become “powerless to fulfil themselves”. Once the moral order loses the respect and assent of individuals, it quickly evaporates. This situation is terminal in the conditions of a modern industrial society which celebrates the alienability of social bonds, limitless accumulation and the reduction of everything to monetary value. For Durkheim, a meaningful and fulfilling life cannot be lived upon such a volatile premise. A legitimate moral authority is required to impose upon individuals definite limitations to their needs. Without such an authority, individuals will “expect everything their needs demand”. Even the fulfilment of these needs will just lead to their inevitable extension, resulting in a continual malaise (Durkheim, 1897, p. 209).

What human beings need, therefore, is regulation and limitation of their needs to clear and attainable goals. For Durkheim, the mechanism for restraint and self-control is not present within the nature of the individual human being. The only thing that is capable of regulating human beings is society: the institution of moral laws and procedural rules. Hence, Durkheim maintains that overall, what modernity requires most is a strengthened moral order and clearer regulations to replace the obsolescent traditions that preceded it. These traditions had once corresponded to social configurations where the division of labour was narrower and production took place at a slower pace. Prior to modernity, the social order was sacred; it comprised of an individual's beliefs and practices in their entirety, hence it was inescapable (Durkheim, 1972, pp. 179–180). Social and technological developments now mean that individuals occupying lower positions in the social hierarchy have needs that are not met within the social role assigned to them. The needs of the lower classes have expanded to incorporate needs that were previously exclusive to the higher classes. The result is a deterioration of moral authority and fixed goals.

This becomes even more acute in periods of transition or crisis, where individuals are thrown into social roles either higher or lower than those to which they are accustomed, and in which they were socialized (Durkheim, 1897, pp. 213–214). The effect is largely the same, regardless of which direction the individual moves in the hierarchy. As their position has changed, so have the limitations they face and their needs. The rules and morals that regulate the position they had been in do not correspond to the position they occupy now. Thus, a breakdown in the social order occurs as, for Durkheim, cultural shifts proceed at a much slower and less spontaneous pace than material ones can. The situation is even worse for those in higher social strata. Contrary to those below them who can always fix their goals on the next position up, those at the top have only emptiness above them. Without anything fixed to aspire to and find contentment

with, they are much more prone to the malady of anomie. This, Durkheim claims, explains why suicide is more prevalent among the wealthy than among the poor. Poverty, by its nature, imposes meaningful limitations.

Modernity, however, is unable to go back to previous, more repressive forms of morality due to the development and extension of the division of labour (Durkheim, 1972, p. 178). It needs to be able to incorporate ideals such as freedom, liberty and legal equality for it to maintain legitimacy. One of Durkheim's major questions asks where this authority can be found.

Unlike Marx, Durkheim does not see the total liberation of humanity and complete equality as possible. He criticizes those socialists who hold to this, insisting it is contradictory to promise social harmony, created by encouraging unrestrained appetites, at the same time as promising to fulfil them (Durkheim, 1972, p. 176). Even in a hypothetical society that somehow managed maximized wealth and absolute equality, fulfilment would be ephemeral if there was no point where the individual could regard their needs as having been met. Rather, Durkheim calls for an updated set of rules and mores that allow for the individual to be satisfied with their current role in the process of production. A moral order that corresponds to the social formations of modernity.

This highlights the fundamentally antithetical characteristics of Marx's concept of alienation and Durkheim's concept of anomie. For Marx, capitalism stifles human fulfilment by making needs one sided, necessitating the overthrow of the prevailing order and the emergence of communist humans who are "rich in needs". Durkheim, on the contrary, sees a real danger in the unlimited extension of needs (Lukes, 1967, p. 81). Modernity, in his account, attacks the social functions necessary to restrict and limit human needs. The solution is not the liberation of needs from all external restraints, the alienating impositions of a specific mode of production, but rather the necessity

of a more compatible form of social regulation. For Durkheim, what provokes class conflict is not the unfulfilled radical need of the working class, the need for a classless society, rather it is the lack of cultural and moral values that correspond to the reality of their lives and enable them to be “satisfied with their lot”. Instead of a vision of social harmony consisting of a society where what everybody has is equal, Durkheim sees it as one where the individual knows their place and is satisfied with it; where they are satisfied once their needs are met, hence they have not the right, nor the inclination to ask for more (Durkheim, 1972, pp. 177).

Moreover, Marx sees morality as redundant under communism. Human beings would be unlimited in their potential for satisfaction, the imposition of order would be superfluous as the needs of one would be indivisible from the needs of all. As we have seen, for Marx, once alienation is transcended, society and the morals it entails will cease to appear as something above and beyond human beings (Lukes, 1967, p. 88). Individuals will relate to each other as human beings, not as alienated categories of the prevailing productive mode. Hence there will no longer be conflicting interests, which, for Marx, are only the outcome of alienation. Durkheim’s vision is very different. His ideal is a free but limited society, where social roles and expectations are outlined by a clear, coherent and stable morality. Ultimately, Durkheim’s major premise is that society consists of something above and beyond the individual, with an existence all of its own. Ideally, individuals slot into specific roles and functions within the social organism, and are regulated in ways which correspond to their needs and allows them to live a fulfilling existence. As Lukes puts it, Marx and Durkheim “both sought liberty, equality, democracy and community, but the content they gave these notions was utterly different” (Lukes, 1967, p. 89).

The basis of this divergence lies in the differing accounts of human nature held by Durkheim and Marx. Lukes argues that both theorist’s accounts of human nature lie

within two specific traditions of thought (Lukes, 1967, pp. 85–86). In Marx’s account, human beings have the potential for complete harmony, only hampered by the conditions they find themselves in. This particularly radical line of thought can be traced back, in different forms, through utopian socialists to Rousseau. Durkheim, on the other hand, sees human beings as “bundles of desires”, inherently chaotic and disorderly. Standing alone and abstracted from society, the individual lacks the mechanisms of self-restraint necessary in order to co-exist peacefully and productively. The presence of an external authority to impose order on human beings, whether desirable or not, will always be required to stop them from self-destructing. This, Lukes maintains, Durkheim inherited from Hobbes. However, it may be better to consider Durkheim—with Marx—as a part of the radical democratic tradition begun by Rousseau (Seidman, 1983, p. 173). His concept of society, after all, remains optimistic; that of a benign and enabling arena which ultimately offers the best prospect for need satisfaction. For a more consistently pessimistic and Hobbesian perspective on needs, we turn now to Freud.

3.2 Freud: The Subject Divided

For Freud, society itself becomes the source of dissatisfaction and torment. Freud’s ideal of the totally satisfied man—not woman—is rooted in prehistory, with the primal father presiding over a monopoly of women; rather like a dominant male lion over a pride of females (Freud, 1913, pp. 164–165). This primaeval figure fulfils all his desires at the expense of all other males, monopolizing access to sexual gratification through brute force. In this narrative, as rival males, the sons of the primal father are initially dispersed and disorganized, unable to satisfy their desires as it is denied to them by the will and dominance of the father. A pivotal point in human development comes,

however, when the sons realize that they are capable of combining and overcoming the father collectively and replacing the dominance of a single man with a more mutually beneficial, collective arrangement.

This constitutes “the first form of social organization” for Freud and is a root of much of the complexity of modern suffering (Freud, 1939, p. 132). As the sons are now able to satisfy part of their desires, much of their aggression is allayed. This comes at a price. As they are effectively forced into entering into arrangements of compromise with each other, “a sort of social contract”, their satisfaction will never be total. For Freud, the most satisfying experiences are those that correspond to the most primal of urges. Hence, by entering into society, the brothers effectively turn their back on complete fulfilment (Freud, 1930, pp. 32, 51). Social norms and moral rules necessarily develop out of this compromise as a way of maintaining order and ensuring satisfaction is distributed in an orderly way. The result is that desires are never fully met, but only strategically so. The individual abides by the norms of a society not because they are inherently social, nor out of some functional necessity for limitation, rather they do it because it offers them the best prospect of quenching some degree of their desire. What remains of instinctual energy finds its release through other forms: such a greater sense of unity among people, or as sublimation into creative and productive ends (Freud, 1930, pp. 17–18). These, however, are only ever “weakened” substitutes for what people really want.

Freud not only disputes the more optimistic views of social life, like those found in Durkheim and Marx, he also raises serious questions about the validity and stability of the concept of need itself, particularly in relation to the coherence and harmoniousness of needs within each individual. Contrary to the more sociological conceptions of Durkheim and Marx, Freud proposes that what motivates human beings under the surface are “drives” or “instincts”, which are biologically innate and common to all forms

of life (Freud, 1920, pp. 30–31). There are two such instincts, *Eros*—which pertains to sexual satisfaction and the perseverance of life, and the *death drive*—which makes human intrinsically aggressive and destructive. These drives reside in a part of the mind Freud calls the *id*, which constantly calls out, demanding their satisfaction. Human subjectivity, on the other hand, resides in the *ego*, which comprises of both conscious and unconscious thought. The ego essentially steers the human vessel through the external world (Freud, 1923, p. 259).

There is much that could be said in relation to these aspects of Freud's thought which would go far beyond the scope of this thesis. I wish to here propose that *needs* be understood as manifestations of these instincts, whether directly or indirectly, that correspond to an object. It is in this sense that Freud describes "religious needs" as arising out of "the infant's helplessness and the longing for the father aroused by it" (Freud, 1930, p. 10). The concept loses much of its conscious and rational character when compared to Marx.

When human beings are born into the world, their mind's activity works toward the tendency of the *pleasure principle*. This means the avoidance of displeasure and the pursuit of pleasure (Freud, 1920, p. 1). As the infant grows, however, they come to realize that they are situated within an external world, in specific and limited circumstances. They come to realize that living by the demands of the *id* alone is untenable, because all desires cannot be met immediately and simultaneously due to the finiteness of their existence and their dependence on other individuals for fulfilment.

Unrestricted satisfaction of all our needs presents itself as the most enticing way to conduct one's life, but it means putting enjoyment before caution, and that soon brings its own punishment... Just as the satisfaction of the drives spells happiness, so it is a cause of great suffering if the external

world forces us to go without and refuses to satisfy our needs. (Freud, 1930, pp. 15, 17)

What follows is a reconfiguration of the ego along the lines of the *reality principle*. This adjustment allows the individual to postpone satisfaction when necessary, tolerate temporary displeasure for ultimately pleasurable ends and pursue only those needs which are a realistic source of satisfaction (Freud, 1920, p. 3). Drives which are not satisfied are repressed by the ego, finding their way out through sublimation into other means of satisfaction (Freud, 1914, p. 134). For Freud, the mind adjusts itself to better cope with the inevitability of unhappiness, but this is something human beings do not have conscious or active control over. Nor do we control what and how the ego represses and censors the content of our minds (Freud, 1923, p. 247).

However, this is not the complete picture. As we have seen, there are two innate drives within human beings, the death drive and Eros, each working in opposition to the other, yet also “alloyed” with one another in various ways, making needs complex and contradictory (Freud, 1930, p. 56). In Freud’s view, the antagonistic nature of these drives means that human beings are not capable of self-perfection. According to Freud, the impulse for progress and perfection of human nature and relations, which is evident in Marx and the Enlightenment, is just a combined manifestation of sublimated drives and Eros’s impulse toward sexual satisfaction through human unity (Freud, 1920, p. 36). Yet this kind of sublimation and repression can never supersede the innate drives; they will always be the most enduring aspects of human nature and will continue finding ways to break through.

This is especially apparent when Freud talks about the role the drives have in the creation of human civilization. For Freud, the rational convenience of combining labour for productive purposes is not enough to maintain social order (Freud, 1930,

pp. 36–38). There needs to be an instinctual drive bringing humans together which overcomes the aggressive death drive which opposes society. This becomes the function of Eros, for which in civilization, sexual drives become reconstituted as an “aim-inhibited” love, bringing humans together (Freud, 1921, 72–73). By imposing restrictions on the sexual act, civilization diverts libidinal energy toward its own development and reproduction, enabling technological and institutional advancement. However, these restrictions also mean that individuals within civilization fail to find full satisfaction of their drives and are fated to suffering. These drives will, from time to time, overwhelm the ego and find a way through. Thus, for Freud, transgressions will always be a part of civilized life (Freud, 1930, pp. 39–40).

As a way to cope with the inner conflict of civilized life, the human mind develops what Freud calls the *super-ego*. This is an internalized version of the kinds of morals and laws which govern social life. The super-ego sets itself up to police the ego and ensure that it does not act, or even think, in ways which will result in a loss of love (Freud, 1930, pp. 62–63). It also functions as an outlet for the death drive, transferring aggression which seeks an object in the external world—which would mean ostracism, a loss of love and a sense of guilt—onto the ego itself in acts of punishment (Freud, 1930, p. 73). The task of the embattled ego is to negotiate the conflict between the limitations placed on it by the repressive culture necessary for civilization, the conflicting demands of the ever-present drives and the contradiction between the id and the super-ego (Rieff, 1973, p. 57, 63–64). Failure to adequately balance these forces results in different forms of neurosis. In which case, an analyst is needed to assist ego in restoring its strength and reveal to consciousness enough understanding of the inner turmoil. This allows the subject to comprehend it in a rational and conciliatory manner. In this sense, neurosis is the result of civilized life; its product, repressive culture, is what makes mental conflict so acute.

For Freud, human civilization is ultimately built upon a foundation of guilt. This guilt originated with the brothers who overcame and killed the primal father (Freud, 1930, p. 68). Ambivalence to the primal father, and the “phylogenetic” guilt over the original act of his murder, continues to torment human beings to this day (Freud, 1939, pp. 159, 161). However, another continuing source of guilt is the innate drives and their continual pushing against the demands of civilization. This first occurs when individuals act out their drives in a way opposed to civilization, thus transgressing social mores and provoking the ire of the group. But it continues as an internal process, as the super-ego zealously guards against a repetition of such an event, and its deleterious consequences for Eros. The persistence of the drives, and the super-ego’s continuing awareness of them, results in an “enduring inner unhappiness” which plagues civilization and manifests as various forms of discontent (Freud, 1930, pp. 63, 72).

[G]oaded on by the id, hemmed in by the super-ego, and rebuffed by reality, the ego struggles to cope with its economic task of reducing the forces and influences which work in it and upon it to some kind of harmony; and we may well understand how it is that we so often cannot repress the cry: ‘Life is not easy’. (Freud, 1932, p. 104)

3.3 Marx and Freud

In the same sense that Marx sees the needs and temperaments of each individual as stamped with the socially inherited experiences and developments of the past, Freud sees the individual mind, itself, as being a product of its own history. In both cases, what is known and how it is understood is determined by historical circumstances. What is different, however, is that for Freud, it is not just a social history but predominantly a deeply individual one (Rieff, 1973, p. 51). Moreover, much of what consti-

tutes our mental make-up remains obscured within our own minds, repressed by the struggling ego. The closest Marx comes to this is in the estrangement of humans from their actual essence, the species being. Beneath this, however, the individual subject remains a rational unity, limited by prevailing social conditions rather than their essential nature. Contrarily, Freud, as Rieff says,

kept some part of character safe from society, restoring to the idea of human nature a hard core, not easily warped or reshaped by social experience. (Rieff, 1973, p. 33)

As Marx sees society as an arena of inevitable conflict, Freud sees conflict inherent in the mind. Unlike Marx, however, this conflict does not point a way to a harmonious future. The nature of human beings means that there is not the possibility of resolving the conflicting demands of the drives once and for all. At best what we can hope to achieve is a rational understanding of the source of our disquiet, so we can then mitigate its more troubling symptoms: a “reconciliation to things as they are” (Rieff, 1973, p. 73).

There are hints in Marx that he considered the question of suffering and the limitations of existence. He notes that as we are natural being and we are dependent on nature to satisfy our needs, we are “*suffering, conditioned and limited beings*” because the objects of our needs exist as something external and are not always available (Marx, 1844b, pp. 389–390). Or as Ollman writes, paraphrasing Marx, “[m]an cannot obtain everything he needs to realize his natural powers” because that would require the “whole world”. Hence, “[n]ature determines all that man is and can become” (Ollman, 1971, p. 82). These few qualifying statements, however, are overshadowed by the image of communism:

[The] perfected unity in essence of man with nature, the true resurrection of nature, the realized naturalism of man and the realized humanism of nature. (Marx, 1844b, pp. 349–350)

The prospect of an irrational core at the centre of human subjectivity sits uneasily with Marxism. Human beings, in Marx, are not subject to the inherent and uncontrollable instincts and drives that animals are, they are distinguished by the very fact that they have transcended this (Heller, 1976, p. 42). Society and history have transformed human nature to the point that now they only have needs, these needs could be rational and cohesive given the right circumstances. It is ultimately within the control of human beings whether they come achieve it. Rather than being steered by our embattled ego, we are steered by our needs, but this does not occur behind our backs, our needs are respondent to our will (Heller, 1976, p. 41). Putting aside the 20th century efforts to reconcile the thoughts of Marx and Freud⁶, the approach Marx takes to the kinds of problems later raised by Freudian psychology is that of a “man of the Enlightenment” (Heller, 1976, p. 42). By taking up a psychologically “monist” view, Marx assumes communism will provide the circumstances where all human activity and relations can proceed in an entirely rational and harmonious manner (Soper, 1981, p. 153). In this view, if human beings appear internally divided, it is not because they are essentially so; rather it is due to determination by the contradictory nature of social circumstances they inhabit.

This relates to Marx’s point that our needs are determined by our historical situation, that different societies or different class positions experience the world from specific circumstances, thus giving us needs that are relative to those circumstances. It has been argued that this can be described as a “historical unconscious” in Marx (Tallis, 1997, p. 229). After all, it is not as though we are in a position to choose when or where we are born, and the circumstances that have shaped us are often shrouded in mystery.

Nevertheless, in Marx, needs always remain a conscious and active aspect of life. It is entirely feasible that a worker could forgo their needs in order to avoid the alienation of the workplace, even if this meant destitution or starvation. We know our needs, and their fulfilment remains a choice, whether or not it is a viable choice. In Freud, however, with his emphasis on subterranean drives, much of that choice is taken away. We are forced to repress and forgo the satisfaction of our drives in Freud's account, but most of this happens in the unconscious, without our knowing it. Moreover, once repressed, the drives do not just go away: they eventually find ways of bubbling to the surface; through sublimated energy, through speech errors, through our dreams or, at worst, through neurosis.

There is clearly no space for a concept as pessimistic as the death drive in Marx's account. The bold assumption of communism, as we have seen, is that once the alienation that spoils our relations with each other is removed, humanity will act in unity, in correspondence with the species-being, with conflict over differing personal interests being inconceivable. This requires an optimistic conception of human nature, that sees vice as the product of a distorted social world. Even when Marx broaches the seemingly irrational concept of sex, he does so in an overtly rational manner. As Ollman notes:

Marx believes that when women are accepted as equals, possessing the same rights and deserving the same thoughtfulness as males, then man's sexual activity is no longer that of an animal; sexuality will have been raised to the level of things peculiarly human. (Ollman, 1971, p. 86)

The result is, therefore, that sexuality appears as a wild and uncontrollable drive because of the distorted and alienated relationship between men and women. The relation between a man and a woman is "the most natural" human relation for Marx, but

estrangement spoils and degrades it (Marx, 1844b, pp. 346–347). Men pursue the sexual act as animals, like workers who are reduced to “animal needs” by the alienation of capitalist production. Overcome that alienation, liberate women from their subordinate role, and the sexual act will become a human need, responsive to reason and correspondent to the rational essence of human beings⁷.

Conclusion

Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted. The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living.
(Marx, 1852, p. 146)

In such a way Marx famously summarized his theory of history and philosophy of human subjectivity. It is also this theme that underwrites his concept of need. Marx wants to show that beyond abstract “natural needs”, human beings are essentially nothing and potentially anything. We create our own needs through active appropriation of nature, but we do not start from nowhere. Human beings are born into given modes of production, intercourse and thought that determine what they need and how those needs are satisfied. We all start out working with what we have already got. Our history, and the way in which past generations have created and recreated the human world, through their own conscious and active engagement with the nature surrounding them and within them, is what separates us from the animals. Marx’s sociology of needs is a theory of culture that places the history of productive forces at its centre.

What emerges within Marx is a sense of a human need for self-realization as a categorical imperative. It is in this sense that labour is the most vital need of human

beings. Labour not only allows us to produce for the sake of subsistence, but it is the expression of our being, the objectification of ourselves onto the world. Once it goes beyond fulfilling the needs for survival, labour is practised for its own sake and higher needs are cultivated. Labour that is free and creative, limited not by the prevailing economic conditions, but by those needs themselves, is the goal for Marx: The culmination of a teleological movement toward the full realization of the human species-being.

The struggle of self-determining labour against the restrictive economic conditions of each epoch is the essence of history for Marx. It is this need which pushes against the productive forces of a given epoch, necessitating developments toward higher modes of being. Communism represents the telos of this process, the point at which the way production is organized is no longer a fetter on the ability of human beings to labour in an unrestricted and fulfilling way. It is also by reference to this innate need that Marx can deem capitalism to be “one-sided”, contrasted to humans, “rich in needs”, under communism. Alienated subjects, in Marx’s account, cannot help but appear as inauthentic and possessing inauthentic needs. The contradictory role of capitalism in the struggle for authentic self-realization permits Marx to reject it.

Marxism was not intended to be just a way of analysing the world (Márkus, 1978, p. 53). Its intention has always been to take an active role in its transformation. By demonstrating the problems within capitalism itself and identifying their solution, Marx hoped to introduce to the world the ideas which are necessary to change it. Yet here we find a contradiction. Marxism was, by and large, the product of two German intellectuals. Despite insisting that they drew their theories from the empirical facts of their day, their conclusions still rest on a combination of ideals and motifs they inherited from the Enlightenment and Romanticism (Seidman, 1983, p. 100). Communism is the litmus by which all things are measured. But Marx’s vision of communism was drawn from a long line of European utopian thought, which cannot be explained by material

factors alone.

By insisting on the causal primacy of material conditions, Marx created a number of problems for both himself and subsequent Marxists. Communism must be located in the real if his theory is to make sense. This is attempted, by Marx, in two different ways. It is either positioned as an iron law of history, therefore abandoning any notion of human intentionality and with it any theory of human nature or human need. Or it is posed as the inevitable outcome of the human need for self-realization under capitalism. From here materiality must be found empirically within the subjectivity of workers under capitalism—for which there is little evidence—or the theory of communism simply becomes an ideal based on the romantic notions of human unity and self-realization. To pose it this way is to reintroduce the same sort of idealism that Marx criticized Hegel for in the first place. Essentialism has slipped in through the back door.

In Durkheim and Freud we find further disruptions to Marx's political program. By casting doubt on the ultimate rationality of the human being, and insisting on a more limited and pessimistic vision of human nature, they make Marx's vision of a future of unlimited and unrestrained subjectivity doubtful. The conclusion of both Durkheim and Freud is that we need limits. In Durkheim they provide the necessary orientation that makes our lives meaningful and purposive. While the symptoms of alienation and anomie are superficially the same—increasing obscurity of the social world due to the blind and impersonal forces at work under capitalism (or modernity), the causes are very different. There is a real sense that by limiting the horizons of the proletariat, alienation is actually a part of the solution to anomie (Lukes, 1967, pp. 82–83). There is also the question about the functional role of communism itself. What part does the movement that Marx founded itself play in providing meaning, goals and limits to its protagonists? Approached in this way, communism appears more as fulfilling a need within capitalism rather than consisting of the need for its transcendence.

Freud, on the other hand, has deep ambivalence about society and humanity. While it may be our best hope for at least some degree of mutual fulfilment, by entering into the social world we are forever cut adrift from the option of satisfying our most primal of urges. The price we pay for civilization is worth it anyway. Conflict and instability does not just exist in the external world, it goes deep down into the very depths of our psyches. Civilization, at the very least, gives us an outlet for the more unrealisable aspects of our drives, while mitigating the urge to destroy each other. Perhaps most disturbing though is that after Freud, we are left wondering how much we really know about our needs. While both Marx and Durkheim offer concepts of need that allow us to understand them as reflections of our social worlds, Freud points to our biology⁸ and suggests that some degree of dissatisfaction may be an inescapable fact of life. The mind no longer appears as the rational, responsive and perfectible mechanism that it once did, instead replaced by a chaotic arena of conflicting forces.

Marx's promise of a classless utopia remains unfulfilled. The prospect of communism emerges from the post-Freudian 20th century looking less like an outcome of historical forces, and more like a form of "commitment therapy" (Rieff, 1973, p. 71). So what are we left with? Perhaps it is better to look at the situation as Rieff does: remove the prescriptive path to communism from Marx and we are left with sociology.

On the one hand, Marx's detailed political and economic analysis of capitalism still raises important and relevant questions about an economic and social system that often appears as if in conflict with itself. The contradictions of capitalism have not resulted in a revolutionary transformation into a higher stage of being, however the market still appears as tumultuous and chaotic a beast as it did in Marx's day. By assuming capitalism was self-destructive and transitional, Marx developed a keen critical eye for its dynamics and limitations. Marx's sociology of needs raises questions about the intersection of economics with culture. With financial uncertainty rife in today's world,

it would be folly to close the book on this aspect of Marx's thought.

On the other hand, we are left with a concept of needs which is coloured by the ethical, philosophical, and political principles that moved Marx as an activist and revolutionary. Rather than being realized in a communist utopia, these principles contributed to 20th century debates on how capitalism could be restructured to the benefit of all classes. It is imperative that these debates continue. Utilized as perspective rather than dogma, Marx's humanist and democratic ideals can still offer a valuable position from which we, as a species, can both look back at where we came from, and question where we are going.

Notes

¹Although it is not a central concern of this work, it is perhaps worth mentioning that Marx's characterisation of animals is not without its detractors, even among some who largely agree with his conception of human nature. Thus Lewontin and Levins (1990, p. 64) write:

All organisms, even the most rudimentary, enter into a dialectical relation with the world around them, such that at all times they are both remaking the world and being remade by it, so that they remake themselves. All organisms are to a greater or lesser extent malleable and, in one way or another, have been "born premature". Indeed we may say that it is an identifying characteristic of living beings that they are both the subjects and objects of their own existence.

²For those of us living in modern industrialized societies that is. At a moment when the spectre of famine haunts the horn of Africa, it is worth remembering that for much of the world the fulfilment of immediate physical needs still remains the central challenge of everyday life.

³Soper questions the desirability of this unlimited extension of needs (Soper, 1981, 22–23, 25). For her, Marx's theory was built upon assumptions about progress which he shared with political economists. Namely, the assumption that continued and unending extension of production and consumption would be beneficial to humanity. In light of 20th century concerns about sustainability and environmentalism, however, this concept of progress has become increasingly problematic.

Bellamy Foster counters this negative assessment of Marx by insisting that, despite 20th century vulgarization, Marx's original theory of "historical materialism" was very "ecologically sensitive". Instead of the image of boundless and unstoppable growth, Marx, according to Bellamy Foster, insisted on a dialectical understanding of the metabolism between humans and nature. Alienation, in this sense, is cast as the root of our environmental irresponsibility. The transcendence of property relations means humans no longer sacrifice the natural world for the sake of endless accumulation, but instead are able to manage it in a rational, sustainable and scientific way (Bellamy Foster, 2000, pp. 20, 256).

⁴Many commentators have, in fact, stressed a discontinuity in Marx's writing, particularly between the writings of 1844 and those of the immediately subsequent years, when they claim Marx first developed his "historical materialist" outlook. Thus, according to Bell, attempts to reunite the young Marx with the old, thus stressing his humanist continuity is mere "myth-making". For Bell, instead of maintaining a positively humanist outlook, the older Marx "forgot all about philosophy", stressing the pure economic determinacy of all social relations. Bell, who is a critic of both Marx and the Russian style of communism which, he maintains, is descendant from Marx, argues against the centrality of alienation to Marx's later work in terms of the daily reality for workers in the Soviet Union (Bell, 1959, pp. 944, 951).

Another claim of discontinuity in Marx's thought comes from inside Marxism itself. According to Fromm, Russian Communists insisted on a split between the young and the old Marx because their society was even more alienating than that of western capitalism (Fromm, 1961, p. 70). Rather than upholding theories that could become a powerful weapon in the hands of their critics, the Soviets insisted on a vulgarization which was closer to the mechanical materialism Marx criticized in his manuscripts.

⁵As Olsen (1965) notes, there are two concepts of anomie present in Durkheim's work. The first, outlined in *The Division of Labour*, relates to anomie specifically as a result of increasing specialization in industrial capitalism. The second, outlined in *Suicide*, provides the more philosophically anthropological conception present in this account.

⁶There is not the space here to enter into a discussion about the various syntheses of Marxism and Psychoanalysis, many of which contain significant developments of the concept of need. However, to serve as an example it is worth pointing out the work of Marcuse (1955), who tried to reconcile Freudianism with Marx's theory of alienation. Marcuse argued that "modes of social domination" (which bear significant similarity to Marx's "modes of production") each have their own particular reality principle and that the nature of the drives are not historically fixed. Marcuse argues that the "performative principle", which are ideological limitations specific to that mode and the limitations imposed by natural scarcity, which no longer apply under modern capitalism, are transcendable and that capitalism has created the conditions of abundance that can enable a reconfiguration of the ego in closer line with the pleasure principle.

Rieff (1966) offers some critical remarks about this movement, particularly in relation to Fromm (1962) and Reich (1951). Namely that they abandon what is a most important project in Freud; his attempt find meaning for the modern individual by crafting a new morality based on shrewd self-understanding and realistic expectations. Neo-Freudian Marxists, Rieff contends, fall back on old illusory ideals about communal redemption which, like religion, are no longer feasible or robust enough to stand up to rationalized modernity.

Soper (1981) argues that a Freud/Marx syntheses have been of little benefit as they have all privileged Marxism by looking for ways to reconcile the conflicting forces in Freud's theory of the mind, thus reconstituting psychoanalysis as "monism" more amenable to utopian projects. Instead, says Soper, Marxists would benefit from focusing on the limitations Freud points to in Marx's work, and vice-versa.

⁷Feminist critics have read this aspect of Marx as reinforcing gendered binaries, with women being relegated to the realm of nature, as objects of appropriation by free and rational men. According to Winders, Marx's complaint is effectively that "capitalism reduces [men] to the status of women" (Winders, 1991, pp. 61–65). Whether this is a fair criticism or not, it is still unclear where non-heterosexual relations figure in an account that sees the sexual union of man and woman as "the most natural". For a thinker whose tendency elsewhere is to draw out the hidden complexities of social existence, Marx offers here a particularly reductive and simplistic account of gender relations.

⁸Although, there is a great degree of doubt surrounding the biological soundness of Freud's theories (Sulloway, 1992, pp. xii–xiii).

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