Translator’s Note:

WHAT follows is a translation of “Thesen über Bedürfnis,” which is found in Adorno’s collected writings.¹ This text was presented in the context of an informal summer seminar held from June through August of 1942, involving Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Ludwig Marcuse, Friedrich Pollock, Günther Anders, Bertolt Brecht, Hans Eisler, and others. The discussions revolved around two central themes: (i) Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, which presents the worrying portrait of ‘frenzied material progress minus emancipation’²; and (ii) the notion, suggested earlier in 1942 by Henry A. Wallace, that technological advancements could guarantee a ration of milk (and indeed food) to everyone in the world.³

The materials from the seminar, apart from Adorno’s and H. Marcuse’s contributions, are gathered in Max Horkheimer, Gesammelte Schriften, 19 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1985–1996), 12:252-256, 12:559-586, and 19:22-27. While Adorno never published the “Theses,” he did incorporate some passages into “Aldous Huxley and Utopia,” which appeared in Prisms.⁴ However, the reference to “classless society” was—characteristically—

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¹ Theodor W. Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften, 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984), 8:392-96. This translation is published by permission of Suhrkamp Verlag.
² Richard Wolin, “Introduction to the Discussion of [Ludwig Marcuse’s] ‘Need and Culture in Nietzsche,’” Constellations, vol. 8, no. 1 (2001), 128. L. Marcuse’s text, of which Wolin provides a translation in the same issue, was his contribution to the summer seminar.
eliminated in incorporating material from the seminar into the latter publication.\footnote{See page 104 (GS, 8:396) of the present translation, as compared with "Aldous Huxley and Utopia," 110 (GS, 10.1:113), where Adorno refers not to “classless society,” but only to “an order which does away with the irrationality in which commodity production is entangled.” Compare this with, e.g., the subsequent deletion of the 1944 reference to classless society in Dialectic of Enlightenment. \textit{See Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment,} trans. E. Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 138 and 272; Horkheimer, \textit{Gesammelte Schriften,} 5:198. (The deletion is not noted in the version that appears in Adorno’s GS, 3:193.)}

The original pagination from Adorno’s \textit{Gesammelte Schriften} appears in square brackets in what follows.

\textbf{1.} Need is a social category; nature as “drive” is contained within it. But the social and natural moments of need cannot be split up into secondary and primary in order to set up some sort of ranking of satisfactions. Hunger, when understood as a natural category, can be sated by the grasshoppers and mosquito-cakes eaten by many uncivilized peoples. To satisfy the concrete hunger of civilized peoples, however, implies that what they have to eat does not disgust them; in this disgust and its opposite is reflected the whole of history. So it goes with each need. Each drive is so socially mediated that its natural side never appears immediately, but always only as socially produced. The appeal to nature in relation to this or that need is always merely the mask of denial and domination.

\textbf{2.} The distinction between superficial and basic needs is a socially produced illusion. So-called superficial needs reflect the labor process that makes human beings into "appendages of the machine,"\footnote{See Marx, \textit{Capital: Volume 1,} trans. B. Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, in association with \textit{New Left Review,} 1976), 799; Marx and Engels, \textit{Werke} (Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 1956), 23:674. [Translators’ note.]} and which compels them, outside of work, to limit themselves to reproducing the commodity of labor power. Such needs are the marks of a state of affairs that forces its victims into flight, while at the same time firmly keeping them under control, and in such a way that the escape always degenerates into a frantic repetition of the state of affairs from which they fled. What is bad in so-called superficial needs is not their superficiality, the concept of which itself presupposes a dubious inwardness. Rather, these needs—which are not really needs at all—are bad insofar as they are directed towards a fulfilment that cheats us out of this very fulfilment. The social mediation of need [393]—as mediated by capitalist society—has reached a point where need comes into...
contradiction with itself. Critique must take aim at this contradiction, and not at any given hierarchy of values and needs.

3. So-called basic needs are, for their part, to a large extent products of the process of denial, and fulfill a deflecting function. To play such basic needs off against superficial ones is already questionable because both have long been taken over by the monopoly. The Beethoven symphony conducted by Toscanini is no better than the next popular film to come along, and anything with Bette Davis is on its own a synthesis [of this process]. It is precisely this synthesis that is deserving of the most extreme suspicion.

4. The theory of need is faced with considerable difficulties. First, it calls attention to the social character of need and therefore to the satisfaction of needs in their most immediate, most concrete form. It cannot lay claim a priori to any distinction between good and bad, genuine and created, right [richtig] and wrong [falsch] needs. However, it must also recognize that existing needs are themselves, in their present form, produced by class society. No neat distinction can be made between a need proper to humanity and one that would be a consequence of repression. The danger exists that domination might come to reside permanently [die Gefahr einer Einwanderung der Herrschaft] within human beings through a monopolization of their needs. This is not a heretical belief that could be exercised by excommunication; it is a real tendency of late capitalism. This danger does not consist in the possibility of post-revolutionary barbarism, but in the fact that total society [totale Gesellschaft] is an impediment to revolution. Dialectical theory must stand fast against this danger and all the contradictions inherent to need. It is able to do so only by recognizing each and every question of need in its concrete interrelation with the whole of the social process, as opposed to appealing to need in general, be it to sanction, regulate, or even to suppress the legacy of its badness. Today, under monopoly conditions, what is decisive is how individual needs relate to the continued existence of monopoly. The unfolding of this relation is an essential theoretical concern. [394]

5. Needs are not static. The static appearance [die Statik]7 of needs—namely, that they seem to have taken on the static fixation with the reproduction of perennial sameness—is itself just a reflection of material production, which assumes a stationary character with the elimination of the free market and competition, along with the simultaneous perpetuation of class domination. When needs no longer appear static, they will take on a completely different aspect. The solution to the contradiction of needs is itself contradictory. If production were immediately, unconditionally and unrestrictedly reorganized according to the satisfaction of needs—even and especially those produced by capitalism—then the needs themselves would be decisively transformed. The opacity of [the distinction between] genuine [echtem] and false need belongs essentially to class domination. In class domination, the reproduction of life and its oppression form a unity whose law is on the whole transparent, but whose individual shape remains, however, opaque. Were there no longer a monopoly, it would quickly emerge that the masses do not “need” the trash and impoverished sense of quality that cultural monopolies supply in their practicality. The notion, for example, that cinema is as necessary as housing and food for the reproduction of labor power is “true” only in a world where people are organized by the reproduction of labor power, a world that also forces their needs into harmony with the profit and domination interests of employers. Putting this notion to the test today would already seem to presuppose the possibility of the radical transformation of the world. The thought that a revolutionary society would clamor for

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Hedy Lamarr’s histrionics or Campbell’s awful soup is absurd. The better the soup, the more enjoyable the renunciation of Lamarr.

6. It is unclear why the whole present cultural bustle should continue in a classless society. It is no doubt absurd that the capitalist crisis should destroy the means of production that serve needs, yet the idea that cinema and radio—which serve scarcely any need at all at the moment—will mostly fall away in a classless society is in no way considered absurd. The inherently contradictory character of numerous [395] needs will lead to their disintegration once they cease to be foisted on us from above through direct or indirect terror. It is fetishistic to think that the state of the technological forces of production require, in and of themselves, the continuing satisfaction and reproduction of illusory needs, which will dissolve along with capitalist society. Not all wheels have to keep turning in a democracy based on workers’ councils: the demand itself implies a fear of the unemployed, who will disappear along with capitalist exploitation.

7. The question of the immediate satisfaction of need is not to be posed in terms of social and natural, primary and secondary, correct and false; rather, it coincides with the question of the suffering of the vast majority of all humans on earth. If we produced that which all humans now most urgently need, then we would be relieved of inflated social-psychological concerns about the legitimacy of their needs. Such concerns arise only when boards and commissions are established and empowered to classify needs, and when, under the rallying cry of “man shall not live by bread alone,” they decide to give us a portion of our bread ration—which is always too small—in the form of Gershwin records.

8. The demand for production solely in view of the satisfaction of needs belongs to prehistory, to a world in which production is not organized according to need, but in view of profit and the establishment of domination, and in which lack therefore prevails. If lack disappeared, then the relation between need and satisfaction would itself be transformed. In capitalist society, the compulsion to produce in view of needs that are mediated and fixed by the market is one of the chief means of keeping people in check. Nothing may be thought, written, done or made that would go beyond this society, which is kept in power largely through the needs of those who are at its mercy. It is inconceivable that the compulsion to satisfy needs should continue to exist as a fetter on productive force in classless society. Bourgeois society has for the most part failed to meet its immanent needs, [396] but for that reason production has been kept under its spell, precisely through the reference to needs. It was as practical as it was irrational. The classless society, which will abolish the irrationality of the entanglement of production and profit, will satisfy needs and likewise abolish the practical spirit that still asserts itself in the aimlessness [Zweckferne] of the bourgeois notion of l’art pour l’art [art for art’s sake]. It will sublate [aufheben] not only the bourgeois antagonism between production and consumption, but also their bourgeois unity. To be useless [unmütz] will then no longer be shameful. Conformity will lose its sense. Productivity in its genuine, undisfigured sense will, for the first time, have a real effect on need: not by assuaging unsatisfied need with useless things, but rather because satisfied need will make it possible to relate to the world without knocking it into shape through universal usefulness [Nützlichkeit]. If classless society promises the end of art by sublating the tension between the actual and the possible, then at the same time it also promises the beginning of art, the useless [das Unmütze], whose intuition tends towards reconciliation with nature because it is no longer in the service of usefulness [Nutzen] to the exploiters.

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8 “Boards” is in English in the text. [Translators’ note.]