

The Contemporary Significance of Agnes Heller's Radical Needs Theory

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Abstract: “Needs” are a focal point of Marx’s examination of human historical activities and a topic of his historical materialism. Examining the generation, function, status, and basic connotations of needs throughout the history of human activities laid the basic link of Marxist need theory. The purpose of this paper is to combine the theory of radical needs proposed by Agnes Heller with the concrete reality of China’s modernization construction, to directly address the issue of needs in the contemporary social development process of China, and to promote comprehensive social development with needs as the focal point, highlighting the contemporary significance of this theory. The requirements of Heller’s radical needs theory are also a study and interpretation of the ideals of a better life and the idea of building a community with a shared future for humanity.

Keywords: Marx, Agnes Heller, needs, radical needs

1. Introduction

Agnes Heller, as one of the representative scholars of Eastern European Neo-Marxism, addresses the spiritual crisis of modern society from a humanitarian perspective, based on the deeply troubled socialist society in Eastern Europe. Building upon an examination and inheritance of Marxist need theory, she completed works such as “Marx’s Theory of Needs” and “The Dictatorship of Needs,” and proposed her own theory of radical needs. Her aim is to transform the structure of contemporary social needs, truly eliminate alienation, resolve contradictions between individuals and classes, and achieve genuine human liberation. The issue of human needs is becoming increasingly prominent in contemporary society, indicating clearly that needs are not only the premise of productive activities but also closely related to individual survival values, and the optimization of social development. Therefore, research on radical needs theory holds significant practical and instructive significance for today’s economic and spiritual civilization construction.

2. Identifying Various Ideologies and Establishing the Scientific Needs Perspective

When Heller proposed the theory of radical needs, his critique of alienation in modern capitalist society was helpful for us to identify the various ideologies of capitalism, while also having an extremely important enlightening effect on consolidating and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics. The rapid development of the Chinese economy has greatly increased labor

productivity and the material living standards of the people, while also expanding human material desires and self-interest. In contemporary China, consumption needs have always been the absolute driving force behind economic and social development. Some scholars have pointed out that originally, people should be insightful and judgmental in consumption. Consumption behavior should be active and meaningful for individuals. However, the values of consumerism regard the consumption and enjoyment of material goods as the only way to satisfy human needs, leading people to fail to properly balance the relationship between needs, consumption, commodities, and a good life, ultimately becoming addicted to alienated consumption. [1] Marx's critique of commodity fetishism has spread in Chinese social life, where the temptation of interests and the pursuit of material goods are no longer important. The ideology of commodification has become the most important principle in people's daily lives, and material interests have become their only value orientation. Once human needs are transformed into capital, sincere, friendly, and kind relations between people will be turned into the bond of money.

Although Heller's theory of radical needs respects individual needs and satisfaction, it also alerts us to recognize the true nature of these needs while emphasizing their diversity. In today's consumer society, it is important not to be misled by the prosperity and wealth enveloped by various ideologies, and to avoid falling into shallow states of self-indulgence and indifference. Instead, we should scrutinize the essence of alienated needs behind the facade of apparent prosperity and establish a correct perspective on needs. There needs to be reflection and questioning of consumerist values and lifestyles. This does not necessarily mean advocating for a simple spirit; on the contrary, it requires establishing a scientific perspective on needs to adjust people's views on the quality and standards of a good life. Through this approach, we can transform consumer attitudes, reconsider the content of needs themselves, such as generating "creative labor" from alienated consumption, etc. A scientific perspective on needs enables people to break away from alienated consumption, forming a new consumer outlook and values, allowing individuals to "derive satisfaction from creative, non-alienated labor" [2], thus harmonizing the relationship between needs, consumption, and life. [1]

3. Optimizing the Structure of Life Needs and Enhancing Need Quality

The structure of needs is an inherent organic structure within the overall social form, with each society having its specific structure of needs. Heller's theory of radical needs criticizes the structure of needs in capitalist society from four aspects: the reversal of the relationship between means and ends, the reversal of the relationship between quality and quantity, the poverty of needs, and the dominant position of interests. Simultaneously, through an analysis of Marx's united producer society, it presents us with a magnificent new picture of need theory. Currently, the primary contradiction in society has transformed into "the contradiction between the increasingly growing needs for a better life among the people and the uneven and inadequate development". [3] This change compels us to shift our focus from the quantity of needs to the quality of needs. It also necessitates a reconsideration of the root causes of uneven and inadequate development, comprehensively grasping and understanding the implications of needs and equality. Only in this way can we optimize the structure of needs and enhance the quality of needs.

Heller's Interpretation of Marx's Theory of Needs attempts to elucidate several issues. Firstly, the qualitative nature of needs differs from their quantity; excessive pursuit of quantity inevitably leads to the alienation of needs. Capitalist society has fallen into such errors, while communist society focuses on addressing individuals' diverse qualitative needs. We must adhere to Marxist dialectics in addressing the issues of the quality and quantity of needs, emphasizing not only the development of productive forces but also the multi-level and diversified needs of the people. People's yearning for a "better life" reflects higher-level demands for material production, spiritual culture, and includes political, social, cultural, and ecological needs. These needs ultimately lead to comprehensive human

development and social progress. Secondly, Heller believes that in dividing communism into two stages, Marx demonstrated two different positions and attitudes towards issues such as needs and labor. The principle of distribution according to labor still applies to China's current labor distribution system, indicating the significant role of the commodity economy and the law of value. To some extent, labor still carries involuntary implications. However, we should not lose confidence in Marxism and communist ideals because of this. Therefore, we must make sufficient theoretical and practical preparations to smoothly transition towards communism. Thirdly, Marxism opposes egalitarianism and abstract egalitarian ideas but does not ignore equality. Currently, the main contradiction in Chinese society has shifted to addressing the issue of imbalance and inadequacy, namely, concerns about equality. This requires us to shift the focus towards equality while emphasizing efficiency. True fairness does not mean applying the same standards to everyone but giving equal importance to each person's different needs. The shift in the main social contradiction mentioned in the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China reflects both the comprehensive transformation of the social need structure in the new era and the deep concern of the party and the state for individuals' diverse qualitative needs. Therefore, by understanding Heller's theory of radical needs, people can reflect on the existing issues of needs in contemporary society and seek the optimal structure of demands. This undoubtedly holds significant implications for the development of China's socio-economy and the improvement of people's quality of life.

4. Creating a New Model of Needs in the New Era, Developing a Better Life

The correlation between needs and human growth and social progress is often profound. Every individual has needs, and people in every era and society have their own needs. Individuals always face various issues related to the development and satisfaction of needs under different social and historical contexts. Marx did not approach needs from a naturalistic perspective but studied them within the context of practical activities. After fulfilling basic survival needs, humans need to pursue an ideal life under moral and ethical guidance, which distinguishes them from animals. Therefore, needs are the concrete needs of humanity that have been enriched, developed, and satisfied throughout history. In other words, needs are not only the premise of history but also an important driving force for social and historical development. [4] At the same time, Marx and Engels also emphasized the social-historical aspect of needs: "...the emergence of these needs, just like their satisfaction, is itself a historical process." [5] Our needs and enjoyment arise from society, so we measure needs and enjoyment from a societal perspective, rather than using material goods as a yardstick for satisfaction. Due to the social-historical characteristics of needs, we must also clearly define the specific content of different life domains at the level of social-historical development. As Yan Yan stated, the changing primary contradiction in society demands that we shift our focus from the quantity of needs to the quality of needs. It also requires us to rethink the issues of imbalance and inadequacy in development and provide new explanations for needs and equality issues. In terms of the quality and quantity of needs, we must adhere to the dialectical method of Marxism, vigorously developing productive forces to create abundant material products to meet needs, while also emphasizing the diversity and multi-level nature of needs, which are crucial for the comprehensive development of individuals and society. [6]

Starting from Marx's theory of needs, Heller believes that due to the diversification of values in modern society, diverse needs arise. The reason why modern society cannot satisfy people is precisely because their needs are not met or realized. People always strive to satisfy their various needs in pursuit of satisfaction. "We have seen that needs are emotions and, at the same time, motivating forces." [7] However, if people stop satisfying their needs, modern society cannot function. [7] The diversity of human needs is the source of the rationality of demand in modern society, relying on various factors interacting to ensure demand. Radical needs precisely reflect the relative diversity of

human needs. Wang Na once pointed out that in modern society, the forms of people's needs are constantly increasing: people's material life is not only for maintaining life or existence but also for pursuing comfort and satisfaction of the body and mind. Our contemporary political life is no longer a dream that requires only smart and wise leaders to partner with loyal officials but requires everyone to actively participate in public affairs and dedicate themselves to public service. [8] In addition, with abundant material wealth and free time, leisure is no longer the exclusive domain of a few but becomes common to the general public. China is gradually moving towards a universally leisurely society. Human needs develop with the development of labor or production, which means that human needs constantly evolve with social progress. This development is infinite, and its ultimate historical direction is to achieve comprehensive human development and freedom. [9] The report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China pointed out: "...better satisfy the increasingly growing needs of the people in economic, political, cultural, social, ecological, and other aspects, and better promote the comprehensive development of individuals and social progress." [3] Radical needs can promote the richness and comprehensiveness of human needs and are a step toward a better life for people. Based on the full development of productivity, achieving full and coordinated development in all aspects of society, and satisfying radical needs, this process itself promotes comprehensive progress and development of society.

5. Leading the Revolution of Needs with the New Development Concept

Heller's theory of radical needs, through an in-depth analysis of Marx's theory of alienation, helps us understand that human alienation does not lie in the abstract human itself but rather in whether social relations at a certain level of social-historical development are rational. The contradiction and conflict between the relations of production and the productive forces are the general root causes of alienation. People's needs in reality reflect the level of development of productive forces and also reflect the current development status of the social system, which is to some extent constrained and defined by specific conditions. Since the reform and opening up, China's socialist modernization has undergone earth-shaking changes, accompanied by numerous contradictions and challenges. Issues closely related to people's livelihoods mainly manifest in the significant imbalance between rural and urban development levels, the income gap between urban and rural residents, and the exacerbation of social conflicts regarding education, employment, housing, legal justice, and other practical interests. The existence of these issues is determined, on the one hand, by the basic national conditions of China's primary stage of socialism, and on the other hand, by the imperfect social security system, income distribution system, and other important factors. The resolution of these contradictions and problems relies on vigorous social development and development-oriented solutions. Furthermore, it requires the continued improvement of institutions and the use of reform methods to address issues. Faced with the difficulties and problems in social development, it is necessary to seriously consider the rationality of China's institutions and guide innovation with new development concepts. Overcoming difficulties and challenges along the way requires both rigorous research and attention to development, promoting further economic and social progress, continuously deepening and advancing reforms. Only in this way can China's socialist modernization construction make continuous progress. [10]

According to Marx's viewpoint, social structures and states always emerge from the life processes of individuals. Therefore, "starting from the material production of immediate life, and on that basis, elucidating the real production process, and the relations of intercourse connected with that, are understood as the foundation of the whole historical development, in their totality..." [5] this becomes a matter of public concern concerning social development. This means that new development concepts cannot arise out of thin air but are proposed in response to the contradictions and problems that China inevitably faces in its development. In the new era, China's economy has entered a stage of optimizing its economic structure and promoting innovation-driven growth, with

people raising higher demands, “with increasing requirements in democracy, rule of law, fairness, justice, security, environment, etc.” [3] This requires us to persist in promoting the coordinated development of China’s social economy, further narrowing the gaps between urban and rural areas, between the east and west, and between different social strata, enabling people to achieve common prosperity. At the same time, we must address economic development issues related to population, environment, etc., to truly achieve harmony between man and nature. Furthermore, we need to improve various environments closely related to our lives and work, perfect public facilities and social welfare facilities, allowing people to live in a beautiful and healthy environment. Therefore, on one hand, we need to solve the problems of imbalance, lack of coordination, and unsustainability in development, and on the other hand, we need to focus on people’s daily life worlds. In the process of pursuing a pluralistic cultural value, we need to emphasize the importance of individual values, value the diversity of daily life, and realize individual needs in multiple ways, achieving the common values of individual values—the core values of socialism. [11]

6. Conclusion

In the process of comprehensive social construction and development, we will truly satisfy the needs for free and comprehensive development of individuals, which is also the ultimate value of the Chinese Dream. The theory of radical needs emphasizes the role played by individuals in satisfying radical needs in a community with positive significance and values. It is consistent with social policies that emphasize maximizing the role of individuals as actors in meeting their own needs. That is to say, the theory of radical needs contains profound social policy thoughts, providing reference directions and reference significance for us to formulate social welfare policies that are more in line with human needs and more efficient in resource allocation. This theory not only enriches and extends Marx’s theory of needs but can also be seen as a practice and development of Marx’s theory of needs in contemporary times.

Today, China is facing many problems and challenges in the process of rapid economic development and the transformation of modern society. In this process, people’s values have undergone profound changes, and diverse needs and individuality have long been formed. Research on Heller’s theory of radical needs helps us to face the need problems in the process of modernization more directly. It also helps us to understand that socialism with Chinese characteristics not only bears the heavy responsibility of promoting political, economic, social, cultural, and ecological modernization but also undertakes the task of transforming people’s views on needs, promoting social development, and the free and comprehensive development of individuals. At the same time, under the theory of radical needs, Heller’s conception of a virtuous life serves as a model for “good people,” promoting individual autonomy and awareness of assuming responsibilities. Moreover, it also sheds light on the implementation of governing the country with virtue and strengthening the consciousness of individual responsibilities in the current era.

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