

Needs and Wants

A *need* is defined as a circumstance in which something is necessary, a thing that is wanted or required. *Want* refers to scarcity, the state of being absent, or a desire for something necessary to life. The concepts of need and want are present in social sciences literature since its earlier stages. Central to the depiction and evaluation of production and consumption systems and activities, they are also significant for the discussion and characterization of broader topics, ranging from the distinctive nature of modern capitalism and the problems of social cohesion and inequality it generated to matters of human agency, particularly in the context of the new social order termed the *consumer society*. Because of the vastness of the theoretical debates and the multiplicity of approaches it generated, needs/wants can be addressed via diverse disciplinary and theoretical perspectives and lines of inquiry. Since an overall presentation would be impossible to accomplish here, this entry privileges the anthropological and sociological debates regarding the relationships between subjects and objects in the context of mass-consumption societies. The entry is structured in four segments, all of them corresponding to main lines of discussion concerning the relevance of the concept(s) to the study of contemporary consumer culture.

Sociologist Don Slater is responsible for one of the most productive contemporary works in this matter. Slater introduces the idea that the centrality of the concept of need in the context of social sciences resides in the fact that consumer culture should be understood as a particular historical arrangement for producing and mediating human needs, and therefore, its evaluation depends on its performance, or its ability to respond to them. However, since needs are defined by people, to assess the performance of consumer culture to react positively to people's needs, it is first necessary to collectively identify what is needed and/or wanted by each society. This assumption links the social definition of needs to the question of how people should live their lives, placing consumption at the heart of the political debate. It articulates, as Slater states, visions of "the good life." To say that something is needed means claiming the allocation of a certain amount of resources to the production and reproduction of a modality of life, which embodies particular values. Moreover, people tend to satisfy their needs through commodities, that is, things acquired in the market, which contributes to the enhancement of the gap between their roles as producers and consumers. This "secondhand" relationship with contemporary material culture raises issues directly related to consumer agency that, as sociologist Roberta Sassatelli stresses, concentrate in the rationalities that guide consumer behavior. Thus, besides being central to the discussion of how people should live, the concept of need is also pivotal to the discussion of how people make sense of their actions as consumers.

Needs and Wants or Needs Versus Wants?

Some of the most visible attempts to find a definition of need that could contribute to drawing possible answers to the above-mentioned questions involved its opposition to other concepts, predominantly not only to want but also to desire, prefer, or wish.

According to Slater, the distinction between need and want is particularly significant because it allows the definition of the first as something essential to a body, a social order or an identity that has to be satisfied. Needs therefore are objective, compelling, existential, universal, and, most importantly, essential. This definition allowed both social thought and common sense to transform the concept of need into a powerful political tool since it anchors social claims in the context of necessity and, often, also of nature. Wants, on the other hand, are defined as subjective or as self-centered aims, desires, or pleasures. Compared with

needs, they are trivial and, by definition, insatiable since they do not result from necessity or nature. Following Slater, the distinction between needs and wants based on these parameters promoted the association of needs to human nature or to society and of wants to individual choice. Thus, the first can be subjected to objective authoritative knowledge, whereas the second admit guidance and intervention only from the individual experiencing them. Notions such as "the sovereignty of the consumer" or "the undisputed nature of personal taste" rely on the idea that wants, contrary to needs, do not constitute a matter of rational knowledge and exist beyond collective life and social debate.

A complementary form of the need/want dichotomy resulted in the distinction between "true" and "false" needs. According to John Galbraith, Canadian-American economist author of *The Affluent Society* (1958), true needs are, by definition, urgent to satisfy given that they are grounded in physical necessities. Unlike false or created needs, they do not ask for the intervention of an external entity to call attention to their existence. They are, as Zygmunt Bauman, Polish sociologist author of *Consuming Life* (2007), argues, grounded in survival, exist in a restricted and fixed number, and have their limits set by their instrumentality. Unlike true needs, false needs are created by the market and constitute powerful mechanisms of social manipulation and control of consumption practices, since they have the ability to induce people to buy things that they do not really need.

Nature Versus Culture

In line with the arguments that try to discern and define what a "real" need is by opposition to false ones or to wants, some authors argue that the reasons beyond its difference reside in its relationship with nature. In *Discourse in Inequality* (1775) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, early nineteenth-century Swiss philosopher, discusses the problems inherent to modern needs. According to the author, in modern societies needs are insatiable due to the fact that they are disconnected from nature and from rational social order. In a state of nature, man acts on the basis of finite needs, of real needs. So the insatiable man of unlimited greed typical of modern societies is not a man in the state of nature but a social being. Society is responsible for the creation of the desiring individual as well as of his unlimited needs, both constituting powerful mechanisms of social domination. Collective life established the grounds for comparison, competition, inequality, and the necessity of approval and admiration by others. Need and desire started to be associated with possession, and social recognition became progressively dependent on the things one owned. With capitalism, socially created needs become more and more determined by fashion and public scrutiny, generating a new form of tyranny that pressures man to validate his social position through private property. According to Sassatelli and Slater, in the words of some authors from critical theory and postmodernism who have embraced this distinction, we can avoid being slaves of the commodity only if we remain slaves of nature. That is, people can only and truly be themselves if desires are limited to the ones grounded in "basic" human necessities. These positions are responsible for the naturalization of the concept by means of a line of argument that tends to define *natural* true needs as "universal," "essential," or deriving from "scientific knowledge." The satisfaction of natural needs is enunciated as a precondition to culture therefore defining it as secondary to nature, and consumption is reduced to the act of keeping the human body alive.

Premodern Scarce Societies Versus Modern Affluent Societies

What happens to human needs in modern affluent societies? How are they different regarding other models of organization of collective life? What are the most relevant impacts of modern needs in structural principles and subjective life?

Although not focused in the discussion of the concepts of needs/wants, Daniel Horowitz's work, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875–1940* (1985), provides an insightful account of the consequences of the changes introduced by the arrival of the "consumer society," according to Francis Wayland, Henry Thoreau, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Daniel Webster. Their ideas greatly influenced throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the American perceptions about the impacts of materialism

on people and on social organization, therefore representing a positive contextualization to the discussion that follows. Inspired by Calvinist principles, Wayland states that "the insatiate striving for more," introduced by increasing consumption, constituted a threat to virtue and morality. Thoreau also contends that the pursuit of more goods dictated by emulation and fashion lessened the quality of life because to achieve it people had to labor increasingly. Tocqueville shares a similar pessimism as, in his view, materialism threatens to dissolve social bonds and turns people restless and anxious. Contrary to the previous positions, Webster's contribution calls attention to the existence of a relationship between civilization and material advancement, therefore contradicting the existence of an opposition between mass production and moral elevation.

The work of Emile Durkheim, nineteenth-century French sociologist, is strategic to discern the lengths and centrality of the concept of need in social theory discussions on the classical subject matter of premodern versus modern social life. In *Suicide, a Study in Sociology* (1897/2002), Durkheim discusses the concept of modern individualist needs in the broader framework of collective solidarity and coordination. In his view, and unlike premodern societies that presented strong mechanisms of social cohesion, modern societies have gradually substituted them by formal networks of interdependences between individuals, which are incapable of generating the substantive cultural bonds necessary for the production of social cohesion. This alteration has major impacts in the ways individuals relate to their needs and desires. In pre-modern societies, economic scarcity contributed to social regulation by controlling human needs and wants. However, modern deregulation and industrial development established the conditions for the exponential expansion of human needs that are, in principle, insatiable. The failure of the mechanisms of social control and solidarity leads to a situation of crescent individualism. Freed from these regulation mechanisms, individual needs become impossible to satisfy, regardless of the developments happening in production, causing both anomie and frustration.

While Durkheim's contribution calls attention to the negative impacts of modern needs, as well as to their consequences in terms of further individualism, in the social order, Marxist theory established the grounds for a conceptualization of "the consumer" as a subject more and more incapable of recognizing what his needs and wants really are. According to Karl Marx, nineteenth-century social scientist and philosopher, to expand production in capitalist economies, producers have to gain control over human needs. This means that production does not respond to consumer necessities but rather creates and shapes them, according to its own particular economic interests. In the *Grundrisse* (1939/1973), Marx states that production creates objects that correspond to human needs. There is no production without needs. That is, consumption creates the ideal, "the impelling cause for production, which is its presupposing" (91). However, he also mentions that objects can be consumed as objects of needs, only to a certain level. Where the need for a certain use value (i.e., an object of consumption) ceases, "it ceases to be a use value" for "the object is measured as use value by the need for it" (405). In capitalist economies, the production of surplus value, based on the increase of the productive forces, will necessarily require the production of new consumption: "firstly quantitative expansion of existing consumption; secondly: creation of new needs by propagating existing ones in a wide circle; *thirdly*: production of *new* needs and discovery and creation of new use values" (408; emphasis in original). That is why Marxian authors state that in capitalist affluent societies, needs are progressively controlled by the sphere of production, which is gradually both responsible for its shaping and managing and for imposing them on the consumers.

Galbraith, one of the most visible non-Marxian voices, also calls attention to the distinctive nature of needs and wants in modern societies. According to the author, as societies become increasingly affluent, needs and wants are increasingly created by the same processes that are responsible for their satisfaction. Then, high levels of production imply higher levels of want creation, necessitating, in turn, higher levels of want satisfaction.

The work of Jean Baudrillard, twentieth-century French sociologist, also resulted in a pessimistic view of contemporary affluent societies. He argued that modern consumption is not about fruition or satisfaction of human desires. Baudrillard's original position regarding consumption drew upon the Marxist concept of use

value. Things, he argues, never had an original use value that capitalism manipulated to control consumer practices. Since objects integrate a system of communication, classification, and social ordering, their value does not derive from their ability to respond to a specific need but rather from their meanings. In contemporary capitalist societies, meanings or signifiers have, according to Baudrillard, gained autonomy, forming an alternative reality with a specific system of signification. Consequently, he argued, consumption does not relate to concrete needs, since contemporary needs are also part of the abstract system of signification.

Beyond Needs and Wants: The Uses of Things

The theoretical arguments previously presented were particularly relevant during the second half of the twentieth century. These critical points of view of contemporary consumer culture have, however, been challenged by a group of authors who focused mainly on examining how some contemporary mass-produced consumption items were being used by subjects to objectify the nature of modernity as social experience. These alternative perspectives shifted the angle through which anthropology and sociology observed consumption practices. To understand consumption and its social and cultural significance, they argue, it is necessary to observe what people do with the things they get from the market and to ask what part materiality plays in human interactions and rituals; how consumers appropriate, transform, and domesticate objects and their meanings; and to what extent they integrate contemporary cosmologies. That is, why and for what do people want the things they acquire?

These interrogations constitute main lines of inquiry in contemporary material culture and consumption research and contributed to establishing the concept of needs as culturally constituted. *Needs* are defined as formulations of peoples' values, identities, and commitments to live the kind of life they have decided to live. As Sassatelli summarizes, even those needs that look fundamental to survival, such as shelter, food, and drink, cannot turn us back to nature. What is significant about these specific needs is not survival but rather how people managed to satisfy them: what they did to stay alive and with whom. By the same token, the distance separating needs from the concept of wants is blurred. There are no true or false needs, since it is impossible to abstract human needs from social interaction and from the structure of power that permeates them. Moreover, the revision of the concept of needs conveyed with two other significant theoretical shifts: the institutionalization of the notion of consumption as a relational and imminently social practice and the redefinition of the consumer as an active subject in his relationships with things, with other consumers, and with the market.

From the contributions to this major revision, the work of English anthropologist Mary Douglas deserves special consideration since it directly addresses the issue of needs/wants in modern capitalist societies. In *The World of Goods*, Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1979) call attention to the fact that the economy seems unable to respond to the question of why people want things. This happens because the economy has cut the social dimension off the concept, an error that should be amended since consumption decisions have always constituted a vital source of culture in all times and contexts. According to the authors, decisions involving objects and goods are the mainspring of culture, and consumer choices are fundamental to their own life, given that they necessarily reflect who they are and how they relate to others. In the end, consumption is a social and cultural activity of production of a universe of values. Then, instead of thinking that goods are primarily needed for subsistence, Douglas and Isherwood assert that they are needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture. Though some goods sometimes serve physical needs, they also serve to communicate with others and to relate to them. People use things to speak about themselves and to learn things from others. Goods are for making sense, and consumption is about finding consistent meanings made visible through physical things. The objective of consumers, then, translates a concern for information about the changing cultural scene, as well as for getting and controlling information about it if possible. According to Douglas, in a finite social world, securely bounded, meanings echo and reinforce one another. Despite the differences in terms of the intensity of the changes happening in the market, the same is true in economies of scale. Consumers have to gain or keep control of the sources of information so that their interpretations,

their cosmological syntheses, are consistent and secure.

Contemporary theoretical frameworks allow us to understand consumption practices as an expression of social relationships with others and with goods and validate the idea that people actively and strategically use objects for the production of meaning, as well as to mark their social actions and positioning strategies. By focusing on the cultural uses of things rather than on the political and economic mechanisms beyond the relationships between production and consumption, these frameworks situate the study of contemporary consumption in the realm of everyday naturalized practices and call attention to the constitutive and expressive potentials of ordinary, often invisible, and, to use an expression coined by Daniel Miller, humble objects.

—Marta Rodrigues Vilar Rosales

Further Readings

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