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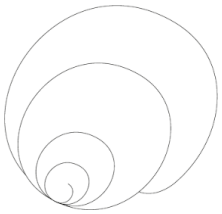

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring human needs in the degrowth discourse: Dissecting assumptions and challenging distinctions

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Abstract
This paper reasserts the question of human needs as a pivotal yet under-theorized issue within the degrowth (DG) discourse. While DG scholarship often draws on human needs to critique the dominant growth paradigm, it does not systematically engage with the analysis of human needs as a research question. The paper offers a threefold contribution. First, it reviews how universal human needs theories—especially those of Doyal and Gough, Max-Neef, and Helne and Hirvilammi—have been deployed in the DG literature, revealing their shared aim of establishing objective criteria for well-being and distributive justice beyond utility maximization. Second, it critically examines the assumptions underlying these frameworks, including the dichotomies between needs and wants, basic and non-basic needs, and true and artificial needs; arguing that they neglect the historical specificity of capitalism as a system of needs. Third, drawing on Marxian theory, the paper reconstructs an alternative approach that situates human needs within the dynamics of capital accumulation and the law of value, showing how capitalism produces unmet and outlawed needs while legitimizing only those satisfiable through exchange. Building on this analysis, it outlines the contours of a degrowth post-capitalist society grounded in democratic social planning, where collective deliberation defines legitimate social needs, determines appropriate satisfiers, and expands collective modes of provisioning. By keeping the question of human needs open—both quantitatively and qualitatively—the paper positions degrowth as a political project of emancipation aimed at reorienting social reproduction toward collective flourishing and ecological balance.

1. Introduction

The prolonged and multifaceted systemic crisis that we are currently living in has reignited interest in the enduring and urgent challenges posed by the existing socio-economic organization. Degrowth (DG) has emerged as a burgeoning interdisciplinary field and practice advocating a much-needed socio-ecological transformation (D'Alisa et al., 2015; Demaria et

al., 2013; Kallis, 2011; Kallis et al., 2018; Schneider et al., 2010). DG emphasizes the necessity of a planned reduction in energy and material throughput to respect planetary boundaries and ensure intergenerational justice. Across its various strands, DG employs the concept of human needs to critique the prevailing growth paradigm, which drives ecological destruction while failing to fulfill human needs for all—let alone for future generations. A DG society is envisioned as one that prioritizes the satisfaction of human needs with lower levels of resource use (Schmelzer et al., 2022). However, the debate appears to oscillate between a quantitative restriction of existing needs and/or their satisfaction, and a qualitative redefinition of human needs.

Despite its frequent invocation, the concept of human needs is not systematically analyzed within the DG discourse, with a few notable exceptions (Büchs & Koch, 2019; Koch et al., 2017; Lorek & Fuchs, 2013). This paper offers a threefold contribution. First, it underscores the significance of human needs as an integral component of any research agenda envisioning a degrowth future and critically engages with the DG discourse from this perspective. Second, it puts forward a point of entry for examining the specific configuration of human needs under capitalism, opening up a third path in the DG dilemma—one that moves beyond the specter of loss, expressed in the curtailment of existing social needs and their modes of satisfaction, as well as beyond the promise of radical abundance, grounded in a wholesale redefinition of human needs in qualitative terms alone. Finally, it presents a new perspective for articulating the question of human needs in a degrowth post-capitalist society.

In the first section, we revisit the DG discourse to establish common ground among its various currents. The second section presents contributions that explicitly address the question of human needs and endorse universal human needs theories. The third section interrogates the inherent essentialism of universal human needs theories by challenging the assumed distinctions between needs and wants, basic and non-basic needs, quantitative and qualitative, and true and artificial needs. The fourth section provides a Marxian reconstruction of social needs within capitalism, highlighting the specific social production of needs and their modes of satisfaction under the law of value. The fifth section builds on this analysis to explore the basic tenets of a degrowth post-capitalist society in terms of the production and satisfaction of human needs. The conclusion summarizes the main arguments

and offers insights for further research and action. The paper highlights the importance of alternative organizations and provisioning systems in their potential to enable the emergence of outlawed needs, the satisfaction of unmet social needs, the production of new types of need satisfiers, and the design of alternative modes of satisfaction.

2. Degrowth: clarifying common ground amidst tensions

Degrowth (DG) theory and practice originate from diverse theoretical sources and encompass a wide range of approaches. One typology identifies five main currents within the DG discourse (Schmelzer et al., 2022): institution-oriented, sufficiency-oriented, commoning or alternative economic, feminist, and post-capitalist or alter-globalization. These currents draw upon seven critiques of growth: ecological, socio-economic, cultural, critique of capitalism, feminist, critique of industrialism, and South–North critique. It is crucial to bear this typology in mind when discussing DG discourse, as DG remains a contested and plural vision.

At the same time, the various currents blend aspects of overlapping discourses, resulting in blurred boundaries that resist rigid classification. Despite these tensions—and partly because of such overlaps—a common ground exists within the DG discourse. Schmelzer and colleagues (2022) propose a definition of DG that builds on earlier theorizations (D'Alisa et al., 2015; Demaria et al., 2013; Kallis, 2011; Kallis et al., 2018; Schneider et al., 2010) while remaining inclusive of its diverse currents. This definition underlines three core principles:
a) global ecological justice;
b) social justice, self-determination, and a good life; and
c) the redesign of growth-independent infrastructures and institutions.

We further elaborate on these principles to identify the core themes from the perspective of human needs.

The first principle, *global ecological justice,* encompasses the planned reduction of material and energy throughput that defines society's metabolism with the environment in terms of both inputs and outputs. The key concepts here are ecological sustainability and global

justice. This principle implies a reduction in material comfort, primarily for the privileged populations of the Global North, in order to ensure sufficiency for all.

The second principle, *social justice,* refers to securing basic material well-being for all through the universal satisfaction of fundamental needs as well as overcoming multiple forms of oppression, domination, and exploitation based on class, race, gender, physical ability, etc. The component of *self-determination* entails participation in the decision-making processes that shape socio-economic conditions. Thus, rather than relying on hierarchical bureaucracies (including certain welfare state institutions), social groups at various levels are empowered to establish their own rules, norms, and values. The notion of *a good life* relates more directly to the qualitative redefinition of the economy, where material comfort constitutes only one dimension of well-being, and immaterial or non-quantifiable needs—such as time prosperity and meaningful relationships—are expanded.

The third principle, *growth independence,* does not equate to recession or depression within the existing socio-economic order. The issue extends beyond an expected decrease in GDP—a measure already deemed inadequate for assessing social well-being (Dengler & Strunk, 2018). This principle calls for the redesign of material infrastructures, social institutions, mental frameworks, and the economic system itself so that they no longer depend on continuous economic expansion. It offers critical insights into which sectors of current economic activity and their associated technologies should be reconsidered from a degrowth perspective. Indicatively, these include the automobile industry and its related infrastructure, container shipping, energy and heating networks, deep-sea oil drilling, waste distribution and disposal systems, the aviation industry, nuclear power, global digital communication systems, and genetically modified life forms. Regarding technology, DG does not settle for efficiency improvements alone, as proposed by the green growth paradigm (Spash, 2021). At the same time, DG neither rejects technology outright nor advocates a return to a pre-industrial society. Recent contributions have opened discussions on technology and innovation as means to enable production and consumption patterns that genuinely satisfy human needs (Robra et al., 2023). Likewise, social institutions—including welfare state functions such as education—must be redesigned to reduce their dependence on growth and foster new subjectivities and relationalities.

The preceding analysis has touched on the question of human needs from multiple angles: the satisfaction of basic needs for all; ensuring sufficiency within planetary boundaries; questioning the legitimacy of certain sectors of economic activity; and expanding the realm of qualitative needs. However, systematic analyses of human needs remain largely absent from most collective works and review articles on DG (Chertkovskaya et al., 2019; Cosme et al., 2017; D'Alisa et al., 2015; Kallis et al., 2018; Schmelzer et al., 2022; Sekulova et al., 2013; Vandeveter et al., 2019; Weiss & Cattaneo, 2017). By systematic analyses, we refer to analytical frameworks that expose conceptual foundations, delineate key distinctions (e.g., needs vs. wants), and define the different categories of human needs employed (e.g., basic vs. non-basic) (Soper, 1981).

In the following section, we revisit contributions within the DG discourse that explicitly address the question of human needs.

3. Human needs in the degrowth discourse: quantitative limitation or qualitative redefinition

Strunk (2023) identifies two contrasting narratives regarding the future post-growth society. The first anticipates a decline in well-being for affluent welfare societies in the Global North, deemed necessary to confront the existential threat of climate crisis. The second envisions an increase in well-being arising from reduced inequalities and the adoption of non-alienating work practices. This debate can be approached through the lens of human needs fulfillment. From this perspective, it appears to oscillate between accepting a quantitative restriction of current consumption toward the satisfaction of basic or fundamental needs and anticipating human flourishing through the proliferation of qualitative needs. As will be shown below, the framing of this dilemma is largely attributable to the endorsement of universal human needs theories.

According to the Universal Basic Needs (UBN) framework proposed by Doyal and Gough (1991), human needs are distinct from wants: they are objective and limited. Doyal and Gough differentiate between basic and non-basic needs, asserting that all humans share basic needs for physical health and autonomy—both prerequisites for unimpeded participation in any

form of life. They propose a set of universal satisfier characteristics conducive to fulfilling these basic needs, irrespective of culture or time. These are termed *intermediate needs* because they are instrumental to the satisfaction of the universal basic needs. The particular forms these intermediate needs take—their specific satisfiers—are socially variable across contexts and historical periods. Table 1 presents this analytical framework. The rationale behind it is to establish an objective criterion for social justice in terms of ensuring the satisfaction of basic human needs for all. Specifically, Doyal and Gough adopt the minopt criterion,[1] which holds that policy interventions should aim for the optimum satisfaction of basic needs through the minimum satisfaction of intermediate needs.

One strand of degrowth scholarship (Büchs & Koch, 2019; Koch et al., 2017; Lorek & Fuchs, 2013) prioritizes objective over subjective well-being, emphasizing universal basic needs satisfaction for all while respecting the needs of future generations and planetary boundaries. These scholars propose the construction of consumption corridors, which define minimum and maximum levels of consumption necessary to satisfy basic needs—both now and in the future (Büchs & Koch, 2019; Gough, 2017). In this view, degrowth entails the universal satisfaction of basic needs alongside a reduction in luxury consumption. Thus, the UBN framework has been further extended to production, defining production corridors as compatible with socio-ecological transformation (Bärnthaler & Gough, 2023). UBN therefore provides the legitimating foundation for this trajectory. Lorek and Fuchs (2019) critique weak sustainable consumption strategies, which assume that technological innovation and responsible individual behavior suffice to transform consumption patterns. They advocate for strong sustainable consumption, emphasizing the role of state regulation, NGO advocacy, and monitoring mechanisms to enable systemic change in consumption practices.

[1] The minopt level of intermediate needs' satisfaction is explained in the following passage: Thus the crucial task in constructing indicators of need-satisfaction is to ascertain the minimum quantity of intermediate need-satisfaction required to produce the optimum level of basic need-satisfaction measured in terms of the physical health and autonomy of individuals. In the spirit of Rawls, we could call this level the minimum optimorum" (Doyal & Gough, 1991, pp. 162–163).

Table 1. The Universal Basic Needs framework.

Source: simplified version of Figure 8.2 in Doyal and Gough (1991, p. 170).[2]

Universal basic needs	**Physical health**	**Autonomy of agency**
Intermediate needs	Adequate nutritional food and water Adequate protective housing A non-hazardous work environment A non-hazardous physical environment Appropriate health care Security in childhood Significant primary relationships Physical security Economic security Safe birth control and child-bearing Basic education	
Specific satisfiers	The specific satisfiers are to be defined based on expert knowledge and consultation with involved constituencies (i.e. social audits)	

Max-Neef and colleagues (1989) also defend the existence of universal fundamental needs. They developed a dialectical understanding of human needs as both lacks—not restricted to economic deprivation—and potentials enabling action toward their satisfaction and, ultimately, social change (Gasper, 2022). Initially, they distinguish seven axiological categories of human needs (see Table 2), later expanding them to include identity and freedom, while highlighting transcendence as an emergent but not yet universalized category (Gasper, 2022). The existential categories—being, having, doing, and interacting—reflect the modes through which axiological needs are expressed and should not be interpreted as an alternative

[2] It is important to note that the original Figure 8.2 provided by Doyal and Gough (1991, p. 170) is a richer depiction of their analytical framework because it includes: a) under universal basic needs, the notion of *critical autonomy* as the ability to question and choose a critical participation based on knowledge of other cultures, b) the four necessary social preconditions for need satisfaction in any social formation: production, reproduction, cultural transmission, and political authority. Given the focus of this paper on how this analytical framework is operationalized within the DG discourse, we do not delve into these, admittedly, critical insights.

taxonomy of fundamental needs (Boltvinik, 2023). The interacting category, in particular, captures how fundamental human needs are expressed within particular contexts.

Like Doyal and Gough (1991), Max-Neef and colleagues (1989) distinguish between universal, non-substitutable fundamental human needs and satisfiers, which are socially and culturally variable. While acknowledging that even fundamental needs may evolve (e.g., identity, freedom, transcendence), they regard such evolution as the product of long-term transformations in the evolution of the human species. They further introduce a critical distinction between satisfiers and economic goods, emphasizing that needs are not fulfilled solely through material possessions but through a multiplicity of satisfiers, including norms, values, and social relations. Their Human Scale Development (HSD) framework thus takes the form of a matrix open to diverse factors—personal, cultural, technological, political, economic, and environmental—that shape the realization of needs in specific societies and among particular social groups (Guillén-Royo, 2020). They also propose a taxonomy of satisfiers based on their effects on needs: violators (which destroy the need and harm others), pseudo-satisfiers (which generate a false sense of fulfillment), inhibiting satisfiers (which over-satisfy one need at the expense of others), singular satisfiers (which address one need through institutionalized provision), and synergic satisfiers (which enable the fulfillment of multiple needs simultaneously).

The completed HSD matrix provided by Max-Neef and colleagues (1989), based on extensive development work with marginalized communities in Latin America, was presented as illustrative rather than prescriptive (Boltvinik, 2023). Following other scholars (Boltvinik, 2023; Gasper, 2022, 2023; Guillén-Royo, 2020), we therefore present it as an empty matrix (Table 2).

Table 2. The Human Scale Development framework.
Source: simplified from Max-Neef and colleagues (1989, p. 33), as presented in Boltvinik (2023), Gasper (2022), and Guillén-Royo (2020).

Matrix of Fundamental Human Needs				
Axiological categories	**Existential categories**			
	Being	Having	Doing	Interacting
Subsistence Protection Affection Understanding Participation Idleness Creation Identity Freedom (Transcedence)				

HSD has been widely adopted within critical discourses on growth and applied in diverse contexts to challenge dominant growth strategies and promote local sustainable development (Gasper, 2022, 2023). Hevia (2023) identifies degrowth insights within HSD, particularly regarding human needs: adherence to limited, universal, fundamental needs; critique of incessant economic growth for failing to meet genuine needs; and recognition that growth compels people to consume more to satisfy the system's own expansionary requirements. Lamb and Steinberger (2017) endorse eudaemonic accounts of well-being, informed by universal human needs theories, to guide policy interventions that establish both upper and lower limits to consumption in the context of climate change mitigation. They argue that HSD can help researchers explore how local communities satisfy their needs, identify social pathologies, and propose new satisfiers capable of meeting local needs within biophysical constraints. Guillén-Royo (2020) similarly applies the framework to examine the role of information and communication technology (ICT) in fulfilling fundamental needs, identifying cases where technologies obstruct rather than support needs fulfillment.

Moving beyond the quantitative logic of growth, Helne and Hirvilammi (2019) propose a distinct taxonomy of universal human needs inspired by Allardt's (1993) work. Their proposed categories—having, loving, doing, and being—are abstract, resembling the existential modes of HSD. Their framework seeks to avoid both anthropocentrism and individualism while intensifying the critique of consumerism. They de-emphasize having, the cornerstone of materialist society, and redefine loving, being, and doing as essential components of well-being. By prioritizing these less materialistic needs, a degrowth society is expected to cultivate new qualitative satisfiers, such as leisure, self-care, and care for others. This qualitative redefinition of human needs may help overcome the socially constructed scarcity imposed by capitalism, implying a condition of radical abundance (Hickel, 2019; Saito, 2022; Singh, 2019). Within this framework, no distinction is drawn between basic and non-basic needs, as the very concept of need entails an imperative for satisfaction. The goal of a degrowth society is therefore to meet universal human needs while minimizing ecological harm. Here, the notion of limits remains relevant, but it concerns the satisfiers rather than the needs themselves, given the abstract nature of the needs' definition.

Before proceeding to a critical appraisal, it is important to acknowledge the merits of these approaches. First, they aim to establish an objective rather than subjective understanding of well-being. This is crucial given the dominance of neoclassical economics, which equates well-being with preference satisfaction and utility maximization. In this framework, the question of human needs becomes depoliticized because needs are equated with effective demand (Soper, 1981). As Doyal and Gough (1991) rightly observe, subjective well-being based on utility maximization has serious shortcomings: it fails to recognize that people in deprived contexts may adapt by lowering their expectations, and it suffers from a circular evaluation problem, as institutions and provisioning systems cannot be assessed for meeting wants that are themselves shaped by prior production and consumption patterns. Second, these approaches strive to establish universal rather than relative criteria for distributive justice—an essential corrective in contexts where collective responses to inequality and injustice are often dismissed as paternalistic. Third, universal human needs theories may enable a profound transformation in public policy design toward an eco-social welfare model integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions, thereby challenging the compartmentalization of dominant policy frameworks (Gough, 2017). Fourth, they recognize

the distributive conflicts inherent in the transition to a degrowth society and offer universal distributive principles to guide decision-making regarding needs satisfaction in real-world contexts (Gabriel & Bond, 2019). Finally, contributions operating at a higher level of abstraction invite reflection on the philosophical foundations of new anthropological types associated with the cultural discourse of degrowth (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2019). The concept of chastened hedonism (Allen, 2024), building on Soper's (2020) notion of alternative hedonism, exemplifies this trajectory.

Nevertheless, critical engagement with these frameworks has revealed a series of limitations, to which we now turn. These concern their taken-for-granted assumptions and distinctions, as well as their insufficient attention to the historical specificity of the system of social needs under capitalism.

4. The limitations of universal human needs theories in the degrowth discourse

Universal human needs theories rest upon a number of taken-for-granted assumptions and distinctions. The first concerns the distinction between needs and wants. Doyal and Gough (1991) advocate a sharp differentiation between objective human needs and subjective wants, based on various criteria—among them the claim that needs do not require the subject's awareness or experience. They illustrate this with the example of a diabetic who requires insulin regardless of whether they are conscious of the necessity. Soper (1993) argues, however, that if needs are to be (and preferably should be) differentiated from biological urges, any theory of human needs must encompass forms of human behavior that, while not promoting health preservation—or even enhancement—are nonetheless pursued across societies and through time. This insight suggests that the difficulty in conceptualizing human needs arises precisely because they operate in the interstice between biological determinations and subjective experience. It not only challenges the ease with which biological needs are presumed definable, but also problematizes the rigid separation between biological and psychological needs.

Indeed, the exercise of autonomy in the UBN framework, or of freedom in the HSD framework, may come into conflict with the needs for physical health or subsistence, respectively. Drawing on psychoanalysis, Stavrakakis (2006) contests the dichotomy between needs and wants, arguing that human motivation is inherently non-rational. Consequently, a universal concept of need, treated as distinct from want, fails to account for the conflictual trade-offs involved in pursuing and satisfying diverse needs. Although Max-Neef's and colleagues (1989) framework appears better equipped to accommodate such tensions, its recourse to the evolution of the human species as the explanatory basis for changes in human needs ultimately reveals a form of biological reductionism (Boltvinik, 2023).

A second core assumption concerns the distinction between basic and non-basic needs (Doyal & Gough, 1991). This distinction presupposes, first, that the boundary between needs and wants has been successfully drawn, and then, that a further demarcation between basic and non-basic needs can be established—categories which both remain distinct from wants (Soper, 1981). In practice, however, this delineation is far less straightforward. Two interpretations of the distinction merit particular scrutiny: (a) the natural/socially developed and (b) the necessary/luxury understandings of human needs.

The notion of natural needs presupposes a fixed human nature to justify its universality. Yet this risks either biological reductionism or the ahistorical imposition of particular psychological traits. Heller (1974/1976) objects to defining natural needs as a separate group (e.g., food, clothing, housing), arguing—following Marx—that internal and external nature cannot be disentangled. As she writes, "external nature exists for man only in reciprocal interaction with society, in the process of socialization, in the organic exchange between man (sic) and nature" (1976, p. 32). Even if natural needs are conceived as limit concepts—beyond which survival is threatened—problems remain. For example, the survival of many today depends upon complex industrial systems and infrastructures (e.g., artificial kidney units). As Fraser (1998), drawing on Hegel and Marx, observes, natural needs can only be regarded as general abstractions: "'natural needs' exist in all societies but in divergent forms of satisfaction" (p. 125). Beneath any conception of natural needs lies a historically specific social structure that shapes both definition and satisfaction. Moreover, defining "natural needs" as "existential limits" weakens the theoretical foundations for collective strategies aimed at

human flourishing—precisely the project universal human needs theories seek to advance within the degrowth discourse.

Should basic or fundamental needs be understood as necessities as opposed to luxuries? Again, this distinction cannot be assumed to be universal or constant. Lebowitz (2003) argues that in capitalism, necessary needs determine the value of labour power and are therefore constrained below the level of social needs—the needs of workers as fully developed human beings. From a quantitative standpoint, capital accumulation requires that wages remain at levels ensuring profitability, thereby preventing the full satisfaction of workers' social needs. Class antagonism thus underlies the definition of necessary needs in every society: an increase in wages allows workers to expand their consumption of necessary goods or to normalize previously luxurious goods as part of their reproduction (Fraser, 1998). From a qualitative standpoint, marginalized groups may redefine their needs as necessary when they enter the wage relation (Fraser, 1998) or the public sphere, articulating their needs politically (Fraser, 1989). The boundary between necessity and luxury is therefore itself socially variable. Furthermore, if—accounting for regional disparities, intergenerational justice, and ecological limits—the maximum achievable provision for all is the satisfaction of basic needs, then why retain the term basic at all? (Soper, 1993).

Turning to the taxonomies of needs, further problems emerge, particularly concerning the distinction between thin and thick theories of human needs (Fraser, 1989). Thin theories operate at such a high level of abstraction that they cannot effectively guide policy or inform transformative strategies. Thick theories, by contrast, offer more specific categorizations but risk arbitrariness or the authoritarian imposition of normative values.

Doyal and Gough (1991) identify two universal basic human needs—physical health and autonomy (including understanding, mental health, and opportunities). Yet physical health is defined within the biomedical model as the absence of disease, which reproduces the model's well-known limitations: its mechanistic and compartmentalized view of the body, its reduction of illness to biological dysfunction while neglecting socio-economic determinants, and its rigid division between physical and mental health (Adam & Koutsoklenis, 2024). In an attempt to bridge thin and thick conceptions, Doyal and Gough introduce the notion of

intermediate needs—universal satisfier characteristics required to fulfill the basic needs (Dean, 2009). However, this category reintroduces many of the same problems. The list of intermediate needs appears somewhat arbitrary. For example, aesthetic needs are notably absent—are they deemed inconsequential, or implicitly subsumed under basic and adequate education? Similarly, no explicitly pleasure-related needs (e.g., sexual pleasure) are acknowledged, suggesting an implicitly puritanical normative framework (Soper, 1993).

Max-Neef and colleagues (1989) adopt a thinner theorization, operating at a more abstract level. They emphasize that their completed matrix, linking axiological and existential categories with specific satisfiers, is illustrative rather than prescriptive. Nevertheless, even sympathetic scholars (Boltvinik, 2023) recognize several analytical shortcomings: (a) conflation of personal traits with social arrangements; (b) underrepresentation of social structures relative to individual attributes; and (c) duplication of satisfiers across existential modes, generating confusion rather than analytical clarity. The distinction between satisfiers and economic goods is similarly problematic. Although intended to decouple need satisfaction from materialism and consumerism, the resulting analysis often fails to do so. For instance, in their matrix, it is difficult to discern any substantive difference between the satisfier “feeding” and the economic good of “food.” In other words, it seems as if the differentiation between satisfiers and economic goods may lead to analytical confusion instead of rigor. If “cooking” were included, it would imply the necessity of further economic goods (refrigerator, stove, etc.), thus re-embedding the material dimension they sought to transcend in the first place.

The framework proposed by Helne and Hirvilammi (2019) belongs clearly within the family of thin human needs theories. Operating at a highly abstract level, it seeks to question the anthropological assumptions underlying homo economicus. Their qualitative redefinition of universal human needs—re-prioritizing loving, being, and doing—recalls the classic distinction between true or genuine needs and the artificial needs imposed by consumer society (Springborg, 1981). This line of thought resonates with the cultural critique of growth found in early critical theory, most notably in Marcuse:

> *We may distinguish both true and false needs. 'False' are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice* (1964/2002, p. 7).

Yet this analysis carries a distinct normative undertone. The identification of human flourishing with the qualitative redefinition of needs risks a reverse essentialism—a mirror image of the hegemonic paradigm it seeks to overcome. Whereas the dominant paradigm erroneously extrapolates homo economicus as universal human nature, the alternative risks positing an equally ahistorical essence in which humanity flourishes only through qualitative needs. The same critique applies to Max-Neef's and colleagues' (1989) typology of satisfiers (violators, pseudo-satisfiers, inhibiting satisfiers, etc.). Despite personal sympathy for its political orientation, it is difficult to defend; as universal claims, such as "formal democracy," constitutes a pseudo-satisfier for participation, while "direct democracy" is a synergic satisfier. Such distinctions risk legitimizing authoritarian prescriptions of "proper" satisfiers.

In conclusion, universal human needs theories rest on a traditional essentialist conception of human nature (Sayers, 1986). Their taxonomies and distinctions are either too abstract to inform political strategy or too specific to avoid normative imposition. Most importantly, they exhibit a problematic transhistoricalism that neglects the historical specificity of capitalism as a system for the production and satisfaction of human needs.

5. The system of needs within capitalism

The concept of human needs is central to Marx's work, yet it remains largely unsystematized (Springborg, 1981). In reconstructing a Marxian understanding of human needs, we follow scholars who privilege a social interpretation over a positivist, naturalistic conception (Heller, 1974/1976). In particular, we credit Marx with opening the question of human needs as a political project—one that enables the evaluation of the limitations of the existing socio-economic formation while offering directions for a post-capitalist society. Soper (1981) insightfully argues that both humanist and anti-humanist interpretations of Marxism tend, to some extent, to foreclose the political question of human needs—the former by anchoring

them in an essentialist conception of human nature, and the latter by equating them with historically specific patterns of consumption.

Our reconstruction seeks to keep the question of human needs open as a central political project, addressing both the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of their determination and satisfaction. Table 3 outlines the main tenets of this reconstruction. Before turning to the analytical presentation, we establish the methodological foundations upon which it is based:

a) a distinction between transhistorical categories and their historically specific social forms (Fracchia, 2004);
b) the understanding of the system of needs as a transhistorical category, since every socio-economic formation entails a particular system of needs;
c) the recognition that the system of needs is ultimately grounded in the corporeal organization of human beings. However, rather than treating this corporeality as a finite set of biological needs, we regard it as the foundation of historical materialism. The corporeal organization of human beings makes us dependent on tools, other human beings, and nature in order to satisfy our needs (Mau, 2019);
d) the treatment of capitalism not merely as a mode of production but as a totality of social relations governed by the law of value, which determines both the production and the satisfaction of human needs;
e) the rejection of the dichotomy between the supremacy of production over consumption (and vice versa), since—as Soper (1981) notes—production, exchange, distribution, and consumption are moments of the total circuit of capital;
f) the focus on the social form of human needs within capitalism, in order to resolve the supposed dichotomy between universal and specific human needs, as well as the related binary between natural and socially developed ones (Fraser, 1998).

Based on these methodological foundations, we are enabled to elucidate the particular social form of the transhistorical categories within capitalism.

Table 3. The basic tenets of capitalism as a system of needs.

Source: Synthetic reconstruction by the author.

Transhistorical categories	**Social forms in capitalism**
System of needs	Limits posed by the law of value result in quantitative and qualitative hidden residues. Quantitatively, human needs are unmet due to production oriented towards capital valorisation. Qualitatively, legitimate needs are only those that can be met through exchange.
Use-values (need satisfiers)	A bearer of exchange value, indirectly and accidentally satisfying social needs. Proliferation of use-values enables valorisation of capital. Restriction of use-values occurs when it is not conducive to capital's valorisation.
Social needs (individual needs mediated by the system of needs)	Poor, homogenised needs under the dominance of the law of value, abstracted from qualitative differences.
Social need	'Social Need' appears as demand for specific use-values at the societal level, the sum of requirements supported by the ability of pay.
Collective modes of need satisfaction	Suppression of collective modes of satisfaction

Within the Marxian framework, human needs, their satisfiers, and modes of satisfaction are dynamically interrelated within a system of needs. As Marx famously observed, "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" (1939/1993, p. 92).

"Need satisfiers" can be approached through the concept of use-values. Use-values serve as a transhistorical category in the sense that every socio-economic formation produces them.

However, the relationship between systems of needs and use-values in the Marxian framework remains somewhat ambiguous. As Marx asks in passing in the Grundrisse: "These questions about the systems of needs and the systems of labour—at what point is this to be dealt with?" (1939/1993, p. 528). Bryceson (1983) argues that Marx did not further elaborate on the system of needs because it entered his analysis through the concept of use-values. This risks conflating human needs with their satisfiers. Yet for Marx, human needs evolve historically, and the production of new satisfiers, in turn, generates new needs. Thus, use-values are not confined to the material properties of the objects that satisfy needs; they depend on social relations and, in turn, transform those relations (Rosdolsky, 1968/1977). This underscores the dialectical interrelation between production and consumption. Production generates consumption by creating the satisfier (use-value), the mode of satisfaction, and even the need itself. At the same time, consumption creates the subject for whom the produced objects have use-values, thereby completing the production process. No production occurs without addressing a need, but consumption, in turn, reproduces that need (Marx, 1939/1993, pp. 91–92).

Following the social interpretation of human needs, we can identify three distinct uses of the term social need(s) in Marx's work (Heller, 1974/1976).[3] First, *social needs (plural)* refer to individual needs mediated by the system of needs. That is, social needs are experienced at the individual level but are mediated by the system of needs of every socio-economic formation. Second, *social need (singular)* denotes societal demand for a specific use-value. Each socio-economic formation has to identify through a certain mechanism what is the total need at the societal level for a particular use-value. Third, *social needs (plural)* can also refer to collective modes of need satisfaction, that is systems of collective provisioning such as educational and health systems. For greater clarity, we use the term *collective modes of satisfaction* for this final sense.

Building on these transhistorical categories, we may now turn to capitalism as a historically specific socio-economic formation. The commodity lies at the core of capitalism as a system

[3] Heller (1974/1976) adds another meaning of social need in Marx, the need for communism or the need of the social developed humanity.

of generalized commodity production. Commodities have two aspects: a use-value and an exchange-value. The *use-value* of the commodity is linked with the concrete labour expended in its production, it is the concrete labour exercised for its production that gives an object the ability to satisfy a human need of any type (stemming from the stomach or the imagination as Marx (1894/1981) put it). The *exchange value* of the commodity expresses each commodity's value in relation to others—or ideally, in the general equivalent form represented by money (Heinrich, 2013).[4]

For qualitatively distinct products to be exchanged, they must be rendered commensurable. This occurs because all commodities, within the sphere of exchange, are products of abstract labor. *Abstract labor* is the specifically social form of labor under capitalism: labor that acquires its social character only through the exchange of its products, rather than in advance, through a socially defined division of labor. This abstraction of labor conceals the social nature of production and the interdependence of human beings, transforming social relations into relations among things (De Angelis, 1995).

The law of value entails a particular interdependence between production and consumption within capitalism. Producers are compelled to produce for sale, and their production decisions depend on the existence of effective demand. Consumers, in turn, must possess purchasing power to access the products socially produced as use-values for them. This specific capitalist form entails an inversion whereby use-values are primarily bearers of exchange-value. As Rosdolsky notes, under capitalism, "for use-values to be able to satisfy human needs, they must first prove themselves as exchange-values" (1968/1977, p. 75, footnote 10). This inversion reveals the historically specific social form of use-values within capitalism and highlights its destructive consequences for human well-being and the environment.

The law of value affects social need(s) in all three senses.

[4] As Elson (1979), has eloquently clarified, there is a distinction between value and exchange value in the Marxian framework which goes largely unnoticed by his readers. *Value* is an objectification or materialization of abstract labour. Exchange-value is the necessary form of appearance of value in the general equivalent form of money.

First, social need appears as effective demand: the sum of requirements backed by the ability to pay. “The quantity of commodities required to fulfill the social need, i.e., the quantity for which society is able to pay the market value… Let us note, in passing, that the ‘social need’ that governs the principle of demand is conditioned by the relationship between different classes and their respective economic positions” (Marx, 1894/1981, p. 282). As Marx further observes, “If means of subsistence were cheaper or wages higher, workers would buy more, and a greater ‘social need’ for these commodities would appear—not to mention the paupers whose ‘demand’ remains below the narrowest limits of their physical needs” (1894/1981, p. 290).

Second, social needs—as individual needs mediated by the system of needs—are abstracted from their qualitative differences:

> *In bourgeois economics—and in the mode of production to which it corresponds—this complete working-out of human content appears as total alienation, and the tearing down of all limited, one-sided aims as the sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end* (Marx, 1939/1993, p. 488).

Social needs in capitalism thus emerge from this contradictory unity. They are not the needs of human beings in the abstract; individuals are not enabled to develop qualitatively differentiated needs (the end-in-itself). Instead, they express individual needs oriented towards existing use-values produced for the valorizing needs of capital (the external end). By the valorizing needs of capital, we signify the particular inversion taking place in capitalism, where commodities are produced in order to create more value after succeeding in the test of exchange-value, and not primarily for the satisfaction of human needs.

Third, the law of value affects collective modes of satisfaction—“that which is intended for the common satisfaction of needs, such as schools, health services, etc.” (Marx, 1875/2023, p. 56; Heller, 1974/1976). These collective forms of need satisfaction are suppressed within capitalism, as they depend on provisioning systems not directly subsumed under the law of value (Gonzalez & Neton, 2014).

Ultimately, capitalism generates a specific system of human needs, marked by both quantitative and qualitative hidden residues. Quantitatively, this system leaves many social needs unmet because production is oriented toward capital valorization rather than human flourishing. Qualitatively, it legitimizes only those needs that can be met through exchange, while marginalizing or rendering invisible those that cannot (De'Ath, 2018). These unmet and outlawed needs challenge the totalizing capacity of capital valorization and expose its limits (Chakrabarti & Dhar, 2020). At the same time, they open possibilities for contesting prevailing definitions of human needs, identifying alternative need satisfiers (use-values), and developing new modes of satisfaction oriented toward a degrowth society.

6. Towards a different system of needs in a degrowth post-capitalist society

The degrowth (DG) discourse on human needs appears caught between the Scylla of a quantitative restriction of needs and the Charybdis of their normative qualitative redefinition. Framed in this way, the dilemma has significant consequences. First, it reflects a lack of shared understanding that a degrowth society is, by definition, a post-capitalist one (Saito, 2022). Second, it reveals a tendency to take the existing system of needs for granted, focusing instead on restricting it along basic or fundamental lines. Third, it shows a tendency to advocate qualitative redefinition solely on the basis of restored rationality or on purely normative grounds.

However, an alternative trajectory is possible—one that could repoliticize the question of human needs by keeping open both their quantitative and qualitative dimensions. To pursue this path, we must first historicize the existing system of needs in order to open promising avenues for both theoretical exploration and practical experimentation. Based on the preceding analysis, capitalism shapes the production and satisfaction of social needs in the following four distinct ways:

a) it leaves many social needs unmet because they cannot be supported by effective demand;
b) it outlaws social needs that cannot be satisfied through exchange;
c) it produces need satisfiers primarily aimed at enabling capital valorization; and
d) it suppresses collective modes of need satisfaction.

Yet, these very constraints can also serve as sites of contestation, opening the way toward a degrowth post-capitalist society. Table 4 outlines the basic tenets of a system of needs in such a society along this line of inquiry.

Table 4. The basic tenets of a system of needs in a degrowth post-capitalist society.
Source: Synthetic reconstruction by the author.

Transhistorical categories	**Social forms in capitalism**
System of needs	Limits posed by the proliferation of social needs, total social labour, and biophysical resources.
Use-values (need satisfiers)	Proliferation of qualitatively different use-values. Quantitative expansion of previously restricted use-values (i.e. environmental restoration).
Social needs (individual needs mediated by the system of needs)	Rich, proliferation of qualitative differences in needs.
Social need	The result of democratic social planning taking into consideration: social needs, total social labour, and biophysical resources.
Collective modes of need satisfaction	Expansion of collective modes of satisfaction

The transhistorical categories discussed earlier provide the foundation for exploring the specific social forms that could characterize a degrowth post-capitalist society. Marx's conceptualization of the full development of human beings entails a proliferation of individual human needs—conceived as both lacks and potentials (Sayers, 1998)—in agreement with a key insight from Max-Neef and colleagues (1989). Yet, this proliferation is subject to three limits:

a) the needs of our fellow human beings;

b) the total social labor that each socio-economic formation is willing and able to devote to their satisfaction; and
c) the biophysical resource base that underpins our metabolism with nature.

All three limits are political in the sense that they are open to continuous social mediation.

Rather than allowing the law of value to operate "behind our backs" (Soper, 1981), democratic social planning opens up contestation over what is legitimized as a social need; the types of satisfiers (use-values) that enable their fulfillment; the level of social need as societal demand for these use-values; and the appropriate modes of provisioning.

In terms of use-values, we may anticipate both the proliferation of qualitatively different use-values (e.g., technological equipment that is easily repairable and not manufactured to become obsolete; documentation and preservation of diverse linguistic traditions) and the quantitative expansion of existing ones, given that the constraints imposed by capital valorization would be removed (e.g., eldercare, ecological restoration).

As for the three senses of social need(s), we may anticipate a radical transformation along several interrelated dimensions.

First, in terms of social needs—that is, socially mediated individual needs—we may anticipate greater richness and diversity in the interests and passions pursued, along with the corresponding capacities to realize them. This transformation could traverse both the realm of necessity (work as the production of necessary use-values) and the realm of freedom (work as creative activity, as an end in itself).

Second, in terms of social need as societal demand for specific use-values, such demand would emerge through democratic social planning that balances the satisfaction of social needs with the availability of total social labor and biophysical resources.

Third, in terms of collective modes of satisfaction, we can anticipate their expansion, since—once the imperative of capital valorization is removed—collective forms may prove more

efficient in their use of biophysical resources (e.g., communal transportation replacing private automobiles).

The deliberate use of tentative language (e.g., “may anticipate”) reflects the careful balance this paper seeks to maintain in keeping the question of human needs open as an ongoing political project. Against the charge that a historicist account of capitalism and its associated system of needs leads inevitably to relativism—one that provides no normative basis for evaluating capitalism’s manifold failures to meet human needs—we argue the opposite. The structural constraints imposed by capitalism as a historically specific socio-economic formation indicate precisely where to look for the emergence of an alternative system of needs.

The issue is not only that capitalism fails to deliver on its own promises—by depriving vast social groups of the very use-values it is capable of producing—but also that it defines, produces, and prioritizes certain types of needs, use-values, and modes of satisfaction to the exclusion of others. At the same time, the abolition of the law of value does not imply a value-free, technocratic, or neutral debate that reduces human needs to a matter of efficiency calculation. Rather, it is the precondition for reopening the question of human needs as a profoundly political endeavor.

This is undoubtedly a difficult and uncertain task—its outcome is not guaranteed. Yet it is precisely this task that must be undertaken if we are to envision and construct a degrowth post-capitalist society capable of reorienting human needs toward collective flourishing and ecological balance.

7. Conclusion: repoliticizing human needs in the degrowth discourse

This paper has reasserted the question of human needs as a pivotal yet under-theorized issue within the degrowth (DG) discourse. It has argued that the dominant approaches remain constrained by a persistent dichotomy between a quantitative restriction of needs or their satisfiers and their normative qualitative redefinition. This tension has significant implications: it obscures the recognition that a degrowth society must be understood as a

post-capitalist society, and it limits the scope of inquiry to adjusting or rationalizing existing systems of needs rather than transforming them.

By engaging with the universal human needs frameworks of Doyal and Gough (1991), Max-Neef and colleagues (1989), and Helne and Hirvilammi (2019), the paper acknowledged their contribution to advancing the quest for social and environmental justice against a widespread relativism undermining any such political project, while also identifying their underlying essentialism and lack of historicity. To address these limitations, a Marxian reconstruction was proposed, emphasizing the system of needs as a historically specific and politically contested terrain (see Tables 3 and 4). Within capitalism, the law of value mediates not only production and exchange but also the very formation and satisfaction of human needs, thereby subordinating use-value to exchange-value. This inversion produces a distinctive capitalist system of needs—one characterized by unmet and outlawed needs, the production of particular use-values to the exclusion of others, as well as the suppression of collective modes of provisioning.

Against this backdrop, the paper outlined the contours of a potential system of needs in a degrowth post-capitalist society. Such a system would rest upon democratic social planning, where collective deliberation determines what counts as legitimate social needs, which use-values enable their satisfaction, which is the level of social need that can be sustained, and which provisioning systems are preferable from the standpoint of human flourishing and ecological integrity. This approach preserves the openness of the needs question, holding together its quantitative and qualitative dimensions while rejecting technocratic or moralistic closures.

In this perspective, degrowth entails a politics of emancipation: the liberation of human needs from the imperatives of capital valorization and their re-embedding within relations of mutual interdependence and ecological balance. The repoliticization of needs thus becomes the central lever for a broader transformation of social life beyond growth. It invites us to view degrowth not as an endpoint but as a process of collective self-determination, through which societies continually renegotiate the meaning, limits, and satisfiers of human needs.

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