

# Needs/Wants

*Don Slater*

The concept of 'need', and its distinction from 'want', plays a crucial role in many societies. It is also written profoundly into modern social thought. To say that something is a need is to say that it is essential to the continued existence or identity of a body, person or social order. Thus people talk of 'basic needs' for food, clothing and shelter which if not satisfied will cause death or ill-health: a failure to reproduce a social entity. Basic needs, as defined for example by international aid agencies, may also include such things as health, human rights, control over reproduction: things whose absence would entail living something less than the life to which one is entitled. The list of basic needs can be extended to needs for love or security or creativity or education, indicating that humans are essentially more than bodies and need certain capacities or pleasures in order to be what a community considers really human. Much modern thought has been preoccupied with defining real, basic or essential humanity, or has made assumptions about what real humans are or should be. At the same time there is some recognition that need has a historical dimension. We can talk about needing literacy or a car or a CD player in the sense that these things are now considered essential or normal to living properly in a specific society at a specific time: we might not be considered a full social member or able to participate fully in social life without filling these needs. Much of political life and social critique consists in judging whether current social arrangements meet human needs and produce a way of life which is deemed good.

What we define as needs are attributed the qualities of being essential, objective and compelling (Table 1). I cannot choose to need food, it is a

## CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

TABLE 1

Needs	Wants
Objective (not necessarily experienced by the social actor, a potential object of another's knowledge)	Subjective (and subjectively experienced)
Determined, compelled or caused	Chosen or decided by the social actor
Essential: necessary for physical or social 'existence'	Luxurious, dispensable, a matter of arbitrary desire, trivial
Universal, defined at the level of body, species or society as such	Contingent, relative, 'eccentric': defined in terms of the peculiarities of a specific individual, group, community
Existential, pre-cultural	Preferential, stylistic, cultural

requirement of my physical body; and whether or not I *want* food, or choose to eat it, it is a need. Needs appear to be anchored in the objective world, either in the physical human body or in the nature or essence of human life. The case of bodily needs demonstrates a further feature, that needs are often considered universal: a body needs food in any society it might live in. The same universality can apply to other declared needs, like many related 'rights', such as the idea that everyone has a need for and therefore a right to education, security, freedom and so on. This close relationship between needs and rights indicates that needs can involve a strong claim to entitlement. Wanting a cup of coffee does not indicate any obligation on the part of society to provide one; to say that 'people need food', on the other hand, implies a moral or social failure if people do not get enough of it.

'Need' is a powerful concept, then, because it seems to anchor social claims in the realm of necessity or even nature: statements about need are generally based on assumptions about what human beings or bodies 'really are'. For example, scientific definitions of the nutritional requirements for basic health can be used to ground national and international welfare policies: the claim is that 'real needs' can be identified 'scientifically', outside politics, and should govern the actions of political agents. Marx, to take another example, based much of his socio-political perspective on claims about the real nature or 'species being' of the human: he argued that the human's essential need is for conscious and creative human praxis and therefore their most pressing need in modern society is the overcoming of alienation. This notion of need grounds his entire theory and critique of history and practice.

In fact, as we shall discuss below, concepts of need are not objective and outside politics, but are always bound up with social values and value judgements, are matters of culture, not nature. However, in social thought needs are generally counterposed to 'wants' – and related terms such as preferences and desires – and these terms convey the idea of value-laden or

## NEEDS/WANTS

culture-bound desires. Whereas needs are defined as objective, wants are largely seen as subjective: they are desires that have to do with how I see myself and the pleasures, aims, motives I define for myself and consciously experience. I need food, whether I consciously want it or not; on the other hand, I might experience an ungovernable desire for chips but that does not mean I need them. Indeed, what I want may be the opposite of what I need; and – as in the case of anorexia – what I need may be subjectively repellent.

Wants are seen as grounded not in human nature and bodies but rather in either the eccentricities of the individual's personality or the peculiarities of their local culture. Wants are therefore not universal but regarded as relative, contingent, pluralistic. By the same token, they are not defined as compelling but rather – unlike needs – are often used to mark out the sphere of human freedom and choice: in both liberal notions of consumer sovereignty and Marxist theory, human progress is identified with moving out of the realm of necessity and the compulsion of animal needs into a realm where choice is dictated by the self-defined cultural desires of individuals. By the same token, however, wants are not regarded as essential but often as actually trivial, mere whim, fashion or fad, and as luxuries: to be able to want something ('I want maple syrup on my waffles') usually indicates a step up from a world in which scarcity anchors needs firmly in nature to an affluence which allows for an open-ended exploration of non-essential, non-existential desires. Finally, because wants are not anchored in the existential reproduction of bodies or identities, they are often characterized as 'insatiable' in that new wants can always be conjured up by the imagination or through social competition.

## CULTURE AND CRITIQUE

If needs and wants are distinguished by such things as their objectivity and assumptions about the nature of human subjects and societies, then each term assigns a quite different role and character to social thought and knowledge. If need is deemed to be objective and compelling, it is also a matter of objective knowledge. There are authorities and experts who can tell us what we need independently of our subjective experience: scientific authorities, moral authorities, political authorities who can say that, for example, traditional values, or 2000 calories per day, or nuclear families with a wage-earning father, or a rolling back of the state are *necessary* for a proper human life in society. Such 'expertise' can be institutionalized in, for example, welfare states, medical establishments, churches, or in social science disciplines: each claims that needs are matters not of individual choice, but of the nature of individuals and social wholes. Social knowledge can therefore be closely allied with social power through concepts of need.

## CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

On the other hand, concepts of need are fundamental to social critique and opposition to power: social critique generally uses some definition of 'real human need' as a yardstick or independent standard by which to judge the adequacy of existing social arrangements.

Wants, on the other hand, admit of no authority but that of the individual who is experiencing them. I may feel you should not want heroin as opposed to a healthy meal, but if you say that that's what you want it would be hard to dispute you: in Western thought, you are the authority over your wants and desires. One can go further – as in liberalism – and say that you are also the sole authority over the moral value of your wants: if you want heroin (and can pay for it and will not harm anyone else by having it) then no one has a right to deny you it. Notions of consumer sovereignty, inscribed in the idea of *de gustibus non est disputandum* (tastes cannot be disputed), rely on the idea that wants cannot be rationally debated or decided but are up to the individual. It is perfectly proper to answer the question 'Why do you want that?' by saying 'I just do', and the role of social thought then tends to be limited to describing people's tastes and choices (as in market research). In contrast, to the question 'Do you need that?' one would have to raise knowledge claims about cause and effect (what things are necessary to accomplish various ends) as well as value claims about what *must* be done (for example, not only a demonstration that food is necessary to keep people alive, but also an implicit claim that keeping alive is something good or essential).

The opposition between these two concepts and the different roles they map out for social thought have been formative throughout the modern period. The modern age, and modern sociology, start with a deregulation of desire in which wants are asserted almost to the complete exclusion of needs (indeed, for the crucial tradition of liberalism, the distinction virtually disappears). This occurs as part of a socio-economic and intellectual revolution against the *ancien régime* from the late seventeenth century. Prior to that point, needs are largely contrasted with 'luxuries'. Luxury is not simply consumption above basic requirements, it is also consumption 'above one's station'. In premodern Europe, levels and styles of consumption were clearly tied to status or standing, often juridically through sumptuary laws: there were foods one could not eat (the king's deer), clothes one had to wear (for example, livery or guild costume), and restrictions on where one could live. This regulation of consumption was rooted in a strong sense of necessity: one's station and therefore one's appropriate needs and consumption were fixed by the 'great chain of being', in a cosmic hierarchy stretching from God downwards. Hence, to express or indulge wants which were luxurious – above one's station – was to be insubordinate, sinful or even treasonable, to rebel against the social, political and cosmological hierarchy and order (see Berry 1994; Sekora 1977).

Various modern forces dismantled these forms of social regulation, including the regulation of needs. Crucially, with the rise of commerce and

## NEEDS/WANTS

capitalism, goods and their consumption are increasingly regulated by economic value alone – the ability to pay – rather than by rules of status and traditional social order. In fact, the triumph of economic value corrodes the old status order to the point that only money talks. What it says is no longer bound by necessity but is elaborated into a consumer culture comprising (in principle) free individual choice amongst an ever more refined selection of things: a culture of wants and of individual choices and preferences. It is often argued that it is the explosion of productive forces in the Industrial Revolution that begins to raise society out of the realm of necessity and compulsion and into that of freely developing wants and desires. In fact, what seems equally important (and even historically prior) are the emerging concepts of the Enlightenment, formalized in liberalism, in which the individual is increasingly thought about in terms of liberty and autonomy from social forces (tradition, status, authority) as well as from natural compulsion. The free individual is seen as the moral, cognitive and political centre of the universe, and is believed properly to pursue its own self-defined interests (its wants and desires, projects and goals) through institutions, such as the market and representative democracy, which are disciplined and directed by the individual's statements of want (expressed as economic demand or political votes) rather than limiting him or her to needs defined by supra-individual forces and institutions.

The early Enlightenment, and early liberalism, optimistically believed that once individuals are freed from authority and superstition to rely on their own reason, they will all arrive at similar conclusions about what is right and proper in the world, including their desires: amongst other things, 'needs' could be rationally defined and identified as part of universalist definitions of the human. This hope wanes over the eighteenth century: it is diversity, disagreement and the limits of reason in defining the human that become more prominent. This hope also comes into conflict with the equally fundamental Enlightenment stress on individual liberty: for liberalism, this overrides all other considerations, above all the urge to rational universal knowledge (or prescription) of needs.

Hence liberalism develops a completely new vocabulary of need and want, one largely evolved through Bentham's utilitarianism. Adam Smith and David Hume had already begun the process of disparaging the notion of luxury; the expansion of desire, they argue, is crucial to prosperity, culture and civilization. Moreover they begin to replace the distinction between needs and wants with terms like 'conveniences of life' which basically take an approving view of middle-class domestic comfort well above the level of basic need (Appleby 1993). Utilitarianism takes a more radical approach. In place of all the multitudinous needs and wants that individuals could conceivably experience, Bentham espouses the highly abstract concept of 'utility' – the capacity of an object to give pleasure or ease pain. This concept is purely formal: it says nothing about the specific needs *or* wants of social members, let alone about their moral value. Utility

## CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

is an attribute any object might have for any reason in relation to any desire any individual might have. Utility is entirely in the eye of the beholder. The social analyst need have no knowledge of either the desires of the subject or the capacities of the object: we need only know *that* an individual wanted something (we know this behaviourally: if they bought it, it must have had utility to them). This concept becomes the centrepiece of mainstream economic thought, particularly after the marginalist revolution of the 1870s: there are no wants or needs, only preferences or revealed preferences (revealed through effectively expressed demand).

Crucially, liberal-utilitarian concepts like utility and preferences elide and even collapse the needs/wants distinction: in fact, the distinction largely disappears for most liberalism. It is fundamental to liberalism that knowledge and moral evaluation of desire are matters for individuals only (subject to the classic proviso that the fulfilment of any of their desires does not harm other social members: hence a liberal *could* condemn a preference for private armies, heroin or toxic waste not because there is anything intrinsically wrong with such desires but because their satisfaction might infringe other people's sovereignty). Specifically, the very idea underlying 'need' – that we can talk about necessities which are independent of the individual's volition or even self-knowledge – is anathema to liberalism. Firstly, it infringes the individual's liberty by placing them under moral, political or social authority. One reason the market (and to a lesser extent democracy) is so miraculous for liberalism is that it can allocate and distribute social resources automatically in relation to expressed desires, without making any conscious judgements or decisions about which desires are better or more basic or important, about what people *need*: the 'hidden hand' does it all. Secondly, it is important that liberalism shares the general positivist distinction between facts and values: one can (for example, through market research) collect facts about what people want, but this cannot warrant any conclusions about what they *should* want. Certainly from Hume onwards, human reason cannot arbitrate human desire but is rather the 'slave of passion'. Reason is restricted to the *manner* in which we pursue our self-interests; the interests themselves are irrational (or, better, arational) and it is therefore unwarranted to evaluate them authoritatively as the needs/wants distinction implicitly does (Slater 1997a).

It is interesting, and important, that contemporary postmodernism converges with some of these liberal conclusions: both attack modernist rational and (social) scientific claims to know the truth of people's needs, and fear the forms of social power with which such claims are often complicit. In a word, both distrust claims which go beyond the expressed preferences, tastes, articulated self-interests manifested by individuals. But the differences between the two are also crucial. Liberals see wants as interests which can be subjectively experienced and rationally pursued by coherent individual egos. Postmodernism, on the other hand, tends to disparage the rationality and coherence of individuals as well as of social

## NEEDS/WANTS

knowledge, viewing the social subject as a disorganized 'id' dispersed amongst various intersecting discourses. The coherence of a choosing, want-pursuing ego is regarded as no less problematic than the positing of supra-individual needs; the focus is rather on amorphous forms of 'desire' which are more or less socially structured and organized.

If liberalism cast the triumph of utility and preference over needs, wants and luxuries as a triumph of freedom, critics from both the right and the left saw this triumph (and that of liberal-utilitarianism itself) as the victory of a soulless, immoral and violent industrial capitalist modernity. 'Need' was a battle standard raised from both the left and the right, but in each case the enemy was an individualism which threatened social solidarity and social values.

On the one hand there is a range of more or less straightforwardly conservative and even reactionary responses, most of them formulated in terms of notions such as culture, community and tradition: statements about real and proper needs are grounded in the authority not of science but of tradition (sometimes underpinned by religion). In this view, needs are properly formulated within the organic historicity of human communities and their evolving values, hallowed by time and involving commitments to ways of life that transcend individuals and single generations (much of the 'culture and society tradition' mapped out by Raymond Williams 1985 is concerned with these issues). It is presumptuous for individuals to formulate their own wants in opposition to the necessity implied by a way of life that is deemed organic and authentic. Modern industrial and consumer culture, however, replaces such communities with contractual and materially self-interested bonds between individuals – bonds which recognize no obligation save to the transient wants and whims of the individual. The result is a crisis of social value, as well as of social order and solidarity. Left critiques of modernity also disparage the replacement of needs by wants. However, they tend to look to the future rather than the past for those authentic and non-alienated communities in which enduring values rather than ephemeral wants will rule again. Images of post-capitalist or post-industrial society, from Rousseau and Babeuf onwards, associate equality and the end of exploitation with the limitation of wants and their subordination to a collective, democratically determined measure of need. Tradition is replaced by politics as the source of overriding social values that might distribute social resources in relation to a consensus over what is necessary for the good life in society.

## NEEDS AND VALUES

So far we have looked at the needs/wants distinction as a distinction between nature and culture, or between universal and individual values or

## CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

choices. In fact, the distinction is far more complicated than this largely because statements about need are in fact closely bound up with the values and value judgements of particular communities. For example, analytical philosophers note that implicit in the statement 'I need  $x$  . . .' is the further statement 'in order to achieve  $y$ ', and that  $y$  always involves some kind of value choice, the choice of a goal or end to which  $x$  is a more or less effective means. Even the basic statement that 'I need food in order to live' is only compelling if one argues that life is a good thing (which would not be true, say, if one were on hunger strike for a cause one believed to be more important than one's own life). It is clear in the case of a health service, for example, that implicit in statements about what people need are assumptions about the expected quality and standard of living of different classes of people at different historical moments (Doyal and Gough 1991).

In other words, both needs and wants are bound up with culture, are particular to specific cultures. The cultural nature of both needs and wants has been a major preoccupation of sociology and anthropology for some time now; and this issue again gives the dichotomy a very strategic role in social thought. We can, for example, counterpose two very prestigious arguments (Slater 1997a; 1997b). On the one hand, it is often argued that there are basic needs (either physical like hunger or more general like nurture or security) but that these might take different cultural forms in different societies: cooked insects or cordon bleu cuisine can equally meet the need of hunger, just as different forms of childhood will do for nurture. The different cultural forms are not arbitrary or whimsical like individual wants since they are transmitted through traditions, language, rituals and so on: they are cultural in a fully social sense. However, they still vary, unlike needs. Social thought might then be interested in two things: accounting for cultural variation, and assessing – across cultures – whether real needs are being met, and if not, why not.

However, this means arguing that we can know what a real need is independently of the individual or cultural form it takes. This argument can be difficult to sustain, partly because we cannot empirically observe any need independent of its cultural form: hunger, for example, always takes the form of desire for, say, a sandwich rather than a sheep's bladder. Indeed, every culture has a different definition of what counts as food (edible/inedible) and therefore of what one can be hungry *for*, as well as when, with whom and in what order (the social rituals of eating), and through which processes of transformation into food (cooking).

Hence, the second kind of argument. It is not correct to say that basic needs take various cultural forms; rather both needs and wants are defined *within* particular cultures, and cannot be defined or identified in the abstract. Culture constitutes both needs and wants (see, for example, Sahlins 1974; 1976). For example, many cultures – perhaps all – make a distinction between needs and wants, between what is objective, essential,



compelling and necessary for being a full member of the society, and what is not. But they each define it very differently. The sociological task, then, is not to define a set of invariable basic needs that exist cross-culturally; rather, sociologists should look at the way in which needs and wants are defined internally to a culture. This position can be pluralistic – that we should respect the diversity of needs/wants expressed by individuals and communities and not try to judge them against some universal yardstick of what humans should really want or need, or (to put it another way) that we should not expect people to want what we ‘know’ they need. There is also the possibility here of a more extreme relativism, culminating in a view that human desire is so entirely a question of culturally specific wants that members of one culture cannot really understand, let alone meaningfully comment upon, those of another. As in liberalism, *de gustibus non est disputandum*: wants are not amenable to rational or even sensible discussion.

The culturalist view, like the liberal stress on preferences as free choice, treats difference as absolute, irreducible and incommensurable. If social thought attempts to reduce these differences to more universal definitions of need, it is not only empirically wrong, but actually infringes fundamental freedoms and cultural autonomy (for example, it may be part of Western imperialism). The universalist response, in favour of a notion of real needs, is that freedom and autonomy are themselves conditional on the meeting of certain needs which are objective in character. For example, in order to have a culture in the first place, or to individually participate in one, it is necessary to have a healthy body and sound mind, the product of particular needs having been met. This approach, it is argued, has the merit of being able to compare different communities or societies as to whether the preconditions of cultural life are being met for the various categories of members, and to provide a critique of societies which do not. (Doyal and Gough 1991 present this argument; see also Soper 1981; 1990 on the politics of need.)

All of these issues become increasingly pressing precisely because modernity and modern social thought seem to be all about the intensification of cultural diversity, pluralism and competition. And this itself is often experienced as arising from the fact that modernity involves (or promises) enormously expanding productive forces, and therefore potentially rising standards of living and increasingly complex and differentiated lifestyles. Both desires and their objects – as well as things like taste, discrimination and style which connect them – become increasingly complex, differentiated and abundant. Marx, for example, worked within the Hegelian tradition in which history is seen as a dialectic between subjects and objects: humans, motivated by forms of need, desire and goals, transform the world through their praxis (Miller 1987). The objective world therefore takes the form of an objectification of their subjective desires. However, this objective culture constitutes the environment in which human subjectivity is formed, and new desires and goals are formulated. In

## CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

transforming the world, humans therefore transform themselves. For most Marxists (and non-Marxists such as Simmel, who stressed the role of urban life as well as industrialization in this process) this dialectic moves in the direction of increasing complexity and refinement. In fact, Marx defines the goal of human development as the production of individuals who are 'rich in needs', not individuals who are satiated, but those who inhabit and require a stimulating and evolving environment which provokes them to ever greater self-development. Marx associates this richness of needs with a move from the realm of 'animal needs' into a 'realm of freedom' in which, freed from the struggle for mere existence (the meeting of basic needs), humans will have the opportunity and material means to realize their 'species being' (see Heller 1976). Capitalism is in one respect heroic and progressive for Marx, since it involves an explosive discovery and creation of new use values, of new needs and objects; however, exploitative class relations mean that those with money merely satisfy wants (trivial whims and fashions), while those who produce the goods are reduced to a point below animal needs, a point at which 'even the need for fresh air ceases to be a need for the worker' (Marx 1975: 359).

Marx was one of the first to argue that modern affluence and productivity could be used to manipulate people. Because it is tied to the imperatives of capital accumulation and the need to sell ever more goods, this productivity is not related to need (to which capitalists are entirely and in principle indifferent) but rather to wants or – more precisely – effective demand: those desires which can be manifested through the market. Capitalists attempt to create ever more desires through ever more objects, as well as through advertising, marketing, design. The evolution of needs becomes a tool of capitalist accumulation rather than the realization of human potential. In a sense, Marx argues that capitalism creates a vast range of new wants, but fails to satisfy humanity's basic need: the need to express and develop itself through unalienated human praxis. Indeed, the range of wants and goods on offer in consumer society are merely false and frustrating compensations for the fundamental alienation of human labour.

These themes were powerfully developed in the work of Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse (1964; 1973a; 1973b) argues that the development of modern productive forces would allow the satisfaction of all human needs with a minimum of alienated labour, thus permitting the expansion of the realm of human freedom and development. Of course, capitalism could not continue on this basis: it requires both continued labour and ever expanding production and consumption. This is secured by creating or inciting ever more wants in people (which means they have to work more for the cash to buy more goods), wants which – because they involve people in continuing alienated labour – are actually repressive even when they are satisfied. More than this, these new wants are actually internalized by the individual as needs. Needs, for Marcuse, are not biological or other essences, but rather 'vital needs, which, if not satisfied, would cause

## NEEDS/WANTS

dysfunction of the organism' (1973b: 26): thus, for example, a car can be a 'vital need' in modern society, without which an organism may not be able to objectively or subjectively function. In this sense, even the most trivial of wants can be experienced as a need, can be installed as 'second nature'. He therefore refers to the commodity system as a counter-revolution at the level of the instincts: individuals are reconstituted around needs for ever more commodities. Instead of goods serving human development, humans are developed to fit the needs of commodity production.

Marcuse's position also exemplifies a central theme of modern critical theory: Marcuse believes that some notion of 'real need' is a *sine qua non* of critical thought and political practice. If the system is able to generate wants for the goods that it is able to produce profitably, and if people come to perceive those wants as essential needs, then they come to identify entirely and happily with the system which satisfies them, without understanding or realizing that this seemingly satisfying arrangement is based on an irrational and repressive deception: whatever the apparent satisfactions, they are based on a system of alienation and slavery to commodity production. The same logic is at work in the non-Marxist Galbraith's critique of advertising and marketing: unless people's needs are defined independently of the system which ostensibly satisfies them, they cannot adequately critique and judge that system: they are rather a part of its smooth functioning. Hence, wants and 'false needs' are associated with conformity, passive manipulation, loss of critical consciousness and failure of political opposition; needs or 'real needs' are the only valid critical vantage point from which the very idea of critique and political opposition can be imagined. This leaves the standard problem of putting forward a principled basis on which real and false needs can be identified or defined independently of the expressed wants of populations. On what basis can Marcuse say that the desire I feel for a car is not a real need, but a want or false need which actually represses me?

### INSATIABLE NEEDS AND THE CURSE OF AFFLUENCE

Marcuse's position also reflects another long-term theme: that ever increasing affluence, occasioned by expanded forces of production on the one hand and the deregulation of desire on the other, may promote great social wealth and social dissatisfaction at the same time. This is largely because with the increase of affluence, the meeting of basic needs accounts for a decreasing proportion of social labour and consumption, and the satisfaction of wants becomes the paramount concern of the population. However, whereas needs are limited (they can be satisfied), wants, it is argued, are malleable, insatiable and relative: they are, in effect, inexhaustible because for a variety of reasons new ones can always be dreamed up,

## CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

whereas ones that have been satisfied are quickly forgotten. A clear example of this logic is provided by 'relational' or 'positional' goods and 'status symbols' (see, for example, Hirsch 1976; Leiss 1976; Leiss et al. 1986): if we eat to satisfy the need of hunger, it is argued, we come to an end when the pangs are sated. However, if we consume in order to demonstrate our cosmopolitan status as knowledgeable consumers of the latest culinary styles or choicest ingredients, then the 'need' at stake is not hunger but status or prestige, and the latter is always provisional. Indeed, this form of consumption is an inevitably zero-sum game, for once too many people have these wants satisfied ('everyone' is eating Mexican this year and makes *fajitas* at home), it is necessarily devalued because it can no longer signify status and social position: 'everyone' has caught up. Thus, ever new wants are generated as people attempt to differentiate position and status – to find a preference and an object with social rarity value. Fashion – a constant revolution in taste structures, a constant hunger for the new – serves both status seekers and commercial interests, but at the cost of a state of permanent dissatisfaction, for unlike needs, there is no end to want. A classic account of this process, and its role in social power, was provided by Thorstein Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1953; see also Baudrillard 1981; Campbell 1989; Miller 1987).

In this view, needs are associated as usual with a limited set of rational or natural utilities; wants are associated with unlimited social competition. Indeed, many accounts imply that all wants respond to the one true basic need of humans, the need for prestige, or belonging, or status. Any want is merely the occasion to fulfil a basically competitive social need which grounds all or most social action. Hence wants, or the 'cultural aspect' of needs (the desire to assuage hunger not just by eating food but by eating at the trendiest bistro), are prey to fashion and taste systems, status hierarchies, the commercial production and manipulation of signs and 'commodity aesthetics' (Haug 1986). This view of things goes back to the eighteenth century in the work of Rousseau, for example, and is central to Durkheim. Liberals such as Hume and Adam Smith noted, approvingly, that people do not act or consume purely in relation to utility, in order to functionally meet needs (see Hirschman 1977; Ignatieff 1984; Xenos 1989). Indeed, the progress of civilization as well as its moral order, they believed, rested on the desire for 'consideration on the part of others': we desire to appear in a good light in others' eyes, and we use our imaginative and 'sympathetic' faculties to think about and adjust how we might appear. Hence, our wants are related to sociality and sociability, our desire for esteem, which Hume and Smith regard highly.

Rousseau, on the other hand, believed that this desire for esteem (*amour propre*, mere vanity) was a form of social slavery: as we move out of the state of nature and into society, the good opinion of others becomes tyrannical, and conformity to fashion the only rule. This tyranny is evil because it renders humans inauthentic, untrue to themselves, heteronomous

## NEEDS/WANTS

rather than autonomous. In nature, people followed the dictates of *amour de soi*: they naturally and unselfconsciously satisfied their real needs as part of a sensible and limited care for the self and its survival. Society and social comparison, coupled with the unlimited capacity to imagine new desires and new points of comparison, make their life unnatural such that 'to be and to appear became two entirely different things, and from this distinction arose ostentatious display, deceitful cunning, and all the vices that follow in their train' (Rousseau 1984: 119). This line of thought is pursued (by way of Tocqueville) well into twentieth-century sociology with figures like C. Wright Mills and David Riesman.

Durkheim also attacks affluence and the deregulation of desire, from a different direction but towards very similar ends. Human happiness cannot be based on open-ended individual desire. There must be a stable framework of real but limited needs. In Durkheim, this framework is provided not by nature as for Rousseau but by society as a moral order above the level of the individual. Liberal-utilitarian modernity, however, dismantles the traditional institutions and values through which this moral order was sustained, replacing it with mere individual self-interests and the pursuit of industrial prosperity. However, he argues, 'the appetites thus awakened are freed from any limiting authority. By sanctifying these appetites . . . this deification of material well-being has placed them above all human law . . . From the top to the bottom of the scale covetous desires are aroused without it being known where they might level out' (Thompson 1985: 111). The price paid for the shift from needs (defined through a supra-individual moral order) to wants (defined by individuals) occasioned by affluence and liberal deregulation is anomie at the level of the individual (the quote is actually from *Suicide*) and a crisis of solidarity at the level of society.

Again, the distinction between needs and wants is central in assessing the cultural and social crisis of a modernity seemingly characterized by increasing productivity and affluence as well as individual autonomy and freedom, yet which is also uncertain as to what is really socially and ethically valued, real, authentic and satisfying. In the broadest terms, the needs/wants dichotomy marks out the preoccupation of modern thought with the new freedoms and pathologies involved in living in a post-traditional society.

## KEY CONCEPTS

**NEEDS** Needs are a way of speaking about those things in life that are essential to survival. In an elementary form they are made up of food,

## CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

water, shelter, warmth and so on. As society develops more and more and enculturates more and more of the natural world needs become greater and less fundamental. Now we all 'need' hot water on tap, refrigerators, motor cars, even air-conditioning so the needs seem to alter with the level of social development.

**WANTS** Wants on the other hand are desires for life in excess of needs. However, with the development of societies and consumer cultures the continuum between wants and needs becomes blurred and in places stretched thin. Not being able to live without a pair of shoes is not the same as not being able to live without that new pair of shoes and so an element of choice in relation to disposable income comes into play when we consider wants. Lifestyles rather than lifeneeds organize wants.