

**Special Needs as Radical Needs:
Towards A Revolutionary Theory of Need that Centralizes Disability and Dependency**

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Hansen (2015) argues that the proletarian condition as a whole is a common one of separation from the means of (re)production on the one hand, and total market- and labour-dependence on the other. The ways different segments of the proletariat experience and struggle against this common condition, however, are highly diverse. Hansen suggests organizing through proletarian difference by acknowledging common needs and inventing common solutions. In this picture, both class decomposition and difference, as well as this commonality of need and dependence, are characterized as sources of strength rather than weakness.

While dependency and need are rarely associated with power (Fraser & Gordon, 2013; Fraser, 2013), both are closely associated with disability (Charlton, 2004). In dominant discourses, the disabled tend to be coded as needy and dependent, an unproductive minority of people who are burdens to the general productive and abled population. Thus the needs of the disabled tend to be considered “special” rather than generalized, basic, relevant, or, radical. The category of “Special needs” is a product of such ableist attitudes. Because of this underlying attitude, many movements of people with disabilities also gravitated towards adopting a rights discourse rather than a needs discourse. The concept of need I will be operationalizing in this paper, however, goes against the commonsensical understanding of needs as personal weakness or lack.

According to Marx, the wealthiest person is the person richest in needs. When needs arise, they demand satisfaction, and their satisfaction creates new needs, driving ingenuity and progress. Built on this concept of needs as powers and capacities, Marx also has a notion of radical needs: those needs whose satisfaction can overthrow the system that has created and yet cannot meet these needs. It was Agnes Heller (1976, 1993) who turned this concept into a full-blown theory.

Connecting Heller's theory with Sayers's (2003) notion of needs as empowerment, Serene Khader's (2008) notion of interdependency as a precondition for agency, and with concepts from disability studies and activism such as universal design (Davis, 2006), I suggest that “special needs” are radical needs. Moreover, I suggest that any need can become politicized and radicalized or defused and depoliticized in different contexts (and through different struggles) as Nancy Fraser (2013) suggests.

Inspired by Lennard Davis's (2006) vision of a world where disability, dependence, and dispossession are the norm, I propose universal access (to the means of (re)production, resources, spaces, etc) in particular and flourishing (based on relational agency) in general as radical needs and expand Heller's formulation of radical needs by adding that radical needs are intersectional; those at the intersection of many oppressions are the richest in needs; the needs of those who are richest in needs can potentially liberate all; and that the radical need of flourishing is system-shattering but world-building. Perhaps the society of the future is not a Society of Associated Producers as Marx imagined but a Society of Interdependent Caretakers where disability and dependence are the norm and the sources of our strength.

Key Words: Disability; Radical Needs; Intersectionality; Dependency; Universal Design