

AT THE LIMITS OF SYMBOLIC NEED PRODUCTION

GENERATIVITY BEYOND SCARCITY

Wanhong HUANG
huangwanhong.g.official@gmail.com

Abstract

In economic theory value is ordinarily the prior term, and yet in practice the market inclines toward need, which is more readily operable than value. The formation of need itself remains comparatively little examined, left to marketing and to the study of consumption rather than to the theory of value. This paper takes the symbolic constitution of need as its object. It argues that the contemporary economic order depends, to a considerable degree, less on the satisfaction of need than on the production of it, and that this production is symbolic, working upon the residue of desire that no object completes. The account is built in two movements. The first is diagnostic. It reconstructs the mechanism through which symbols constitute need, draws on the Lacanian distinction of need, demand, and desire to show why symbolic need production is structurally sustained rather than incidental, and situates the argument within the line of psychoanalytic critique that runs from Marcuse through Baudrillard to the theorists of surplus enjoyment, marking at each station the point at which the present account departs. It then names the present difficulty. The symbolic order that produces need is losing its capacity to do so reliably, a condition here called symbolic inflation, in which the supply of signs runs ahead of the relational value they can redeem. The second movement is constructive. It advances one way of approaching and developing economic thought that begins from generativity, a way that stands beside the approaches which begin from scarcity and leaves them in place. On this approach a range of familiar relational forms may be reread as positive-holonomy cycles that generate surplus without possessing it, and need is relocated as one state within a relational system rather than the sole and primordial origin of the value cycle. The argument continues a programme that has replaced the individual with generative relational being and the sign with a generative relational epistemology, and carries that programme onto the terrain of political economy. It closes, in the manner it requires of itself, on the questions that any generative economics would have to confront.

Keywords: need production; symbolic crisis; symbolic inflation; generative relational being; scarcity; value theory; political economy; Lacan; generativity; holonomy.

AI usage statement: The ideas, claims, and theoretical framework of this paper originate with the author. AI tools were used as an aid in drafting, in the location and verification of empirical and bibliographic sources, and in revision. The origin of each idea has been verified by the author, who takes full responsibility for the content.

1 INTRODUCTION: THE PRACTICAL PRIORITY OF NEED

The argument of this paper begins in a gap between what economic theory works out and what economic practice does. In theory, value is ordinarily the prior term. The theory of utility and of preference is developed first, and demand is derived from it, so that value in the theoretical sense comes before need. In practice, the market and the capital that moves through it incline toward need, and they do so for a reason that this paper takes as its point of departure. Need is more operationalizable than value. It can be acted upon by an instrument that lies ready to

hand, worked, moved, and turned to account with an immediacy that value does not permit, and the instrument by which it is so worked is the symbolic system, the order that a certain tradition of thought has named the big Other. Value, by contrast, is the more complex thing. It reaches into the generative dimension of the subject, into the slow formation of a being that can value at all, and it cannot be coded and discharged in a single symbolic stroke. Need lends itself to symbolic codification because it can be represented through identifiable objects, whereas value concerns the longer and more contingent formation of capacities, relations, and forms of life. An advertisement can produce, today, the want of a particular good. It cannot produce, today, a person whose relations are generative, for that is the work of a formation for which no single sign can stand in. The formal ground of this difference is given later in the paper. Here it is enough to see that need can be bound to an object and value cannot. Capital is not absent from the domain of value. It reaches value too. But it reaches value by longer and more indirect means, through the shaping of culture in its several forms, corporate, commercial, social, and national, through education, through the media, and through an entry into the early formation of the subject itself. The directness with which need can be worked, and the indirectness with which value must be approached, is the difference from which this paper sets out.

This difference has a consequence that organizes the whole of what follows. Because need is the layer that the symbolic instrument can work directly, it is upon need that the labour of the market concentrates, and the contemporary economic order comes to depend less on the satisfaction of need than on its production. This is the paper's central claim, and it is the author's own. The theories it draws upon in the course of establishing it, from political economy and from psychoanalysis alike, are summoned as means of argument and not as authorities from which the claim is derived. The claim is that the greater part of what a consumption economy treats as need is constituted symbolically, brought into being as a desirable form within an order of meaning, and that this constitution has become the economy's true engine. What is purchased in the ordinary transaction is a sign that promises to close a lack, and the lack it promises to close is one that no purchase can close, so that the promise renews itself with each transaction and the engine turns again. This paper accordingly concerns itself with need in a particular register. Bodily need, in hunger and thirst and cold and the want of shelter, provides the indispensable conditions of life and is not in question, and no theory earns anything by denying it. The need this argument follows is the need that enters economic circulation, becomes an object of exchange, and is continually reshaped through symbolic mediation. Its inner structure, and the sense in which it stands closer to desire than to bodily need, is taken up when the mechanism of its production is examined below.

Why the market should concentrate upon need in this way admits of an answer in political economy. Capital lives by the realization of value, by the completion of the circuit in which what is produced is sold and the value it carries is turned back into money and advanced again. The pressure of realization is immediate and recurrent, set by the time of turnover, and it presses the market toward whatever layer can be worked at the speed that realization demands. Need, operable directly through the sign, is that layer. Value, in its generative depth, moves too slowly to answer the pressure of the circuit, and this is why the direct labour of the market falls upon need and the reach into value remains indirect.

Why the sign can work need directly admits of an answer in the theory of the subject. Need, once it is addressed to another in language, becomes demand, and demand is constituted and answered in the field of the big Other, the symbolic order in which the subject speaks and is spoken to. Capital installs itself in that field, or lives upon it, and from within it can bind the object-cause of desire to a good and offer the good as the answer to a demand that no good completes. The sign works need because need, as demand, is already a creature of the symbolic order that the sign commands. The full development of this mechanism is given

in a later section. It is enough at the outset to see that the operability of need is grounded in the symbolic constitution of demand, and that this is what places the instrument of need production in the market's hand.

A difficulty follows that the discipline is not equipped to see, because it lies below the level at which the discipline begins. The symbolic order that produces need can produce it well or badly, reliably or unreliably, and there is reason to think that it now produces it less and less reliably. The signs that once organized need with a certain steadiness, the credential, the brand, the mark of taste and of belonging, have begun to lose their hold. When symbols can no longer reliably produce need, the value cycle that begins from need begins to lose its foundation. This is the condition the paper addresses, and it is a structural condition rather than a passing event, a limit approached rather than a threshold crossed. The title names it as a limit for this reason. The order of symbolic need production is reaching the edge of what it can do.

The argument continues a line of work with a recognizable signature. That work replaced the individual with generative relational being, and treated value as arising within relation rather than residing in a thing or issuing from a lack. It then replaced the sign with a generative relational epistemology, and treated the symbol as an expression of relational value rather than its source. The present paper carries that programme onto the terrain of political economy. It offers generativity as a starting point from which value may be understood, a starting point that lets the received accounts stand and sets a second reading beside them, and on that reading need is placed as one state within a relational system rather than as the origin from which value must be derived. The progression is deliberate. The programme has moved from ontology, through epistemology, to political economy, and the question of need is where that movement arrives.

The argument joins a tradition and departs from it. The claim that the economy produces need rather than merely meeting it is not new, and has a long history in critical thought, from the diagnosis of false needs in the mid-century critique of industrial society, through the analysis of sign value in the theory of consumer society, to the account of surplus enjoyment in the psychoanalytic critique of ideology. This paper stands on that history and departs from it on one point. The tradition has been strong in diagnosis and weak in construction. It has shown, with great force, how need is manufactured and how the sign holds the subject in place, and it has tended to leave the subject there, with no account of a value that would not be a manufactured one. The purpose of the present paper is to supply what the diagnosis lacks, a positive foundation of value that does not begin from lack, and to show that the symbolic crisis, read from that foundation, is the exhaustion of one historically particular way of organizing value rather than the exhaustion of value itself. The distinction that makes this possible rests on a formal criterion, drawn from earlier work in the programme, that separates a cycle which generates value without possessing it from a cycle that extracts value by keeping a lack open.

The paper proceeds as follows. It first brings to the surface the practical priority of need over value in the market and gives it its ground in the operability of need through the sign. It then sets out the machinery of symbolic need production and its ground in the structure of desire, and situates the argument within the line of psychoanalytic critique of the economy. It names and measures the present difficulty, the condition here called symbolic inflation, in which the supply of signs outruns the relational value they can redeem. It turns to the domain of value, and shows why value, in its generative depth, resists the direct symbolic operation to which need submits, so that capital reaches value only by the indirect means of culture, education, media, and the formation of the subject. On this basis it offers a reading of value that begins from generativity, supplies the formal criterion that distinguishes a generative cycle from an extractive one, and relocates need as one state within a relational system. It closes, in the manner it requires of itself, on the questions a generative economics would have to take up.

2 SCARCITY AND THE CONSTITUTION OF NEED

The purpose of this section is to read modern economics rather than to indict it, and to bring to the surface a feature its own procedures keep out of view. However the discipline arranges the priority of value and need between them, it takes the formation of need as given. The want arrives at the analysis already formed, as the demand curve arrives already drawn, and the work of the analysis begins on the far side of its formation. Whether demand is derived from a prior theory of value or read directly from choice, the origin of the want, its variation, and its susceptibility to being made are left outside the model. It is this exogeneity of need's formation that the section brings out, for it is the opening through which the market's labour upon need passes.

The lineage is worth stating plainly, because it shows how firmly the premise is held. In the definition that has organized the discipline for the better part of a century, economics is the study of human conduct as a relation between ends and scarce means that have alternative uses. The definition is precise and, on its own terms, powerful. It fixes the object of the discipline as the allocation of the scarce, and it fixes the ends, the needs and wants that allocation serves, as prior to the allocating. The ends are what one reasons from, not what one reasons about. A later and more austere development sealed the premise more tightly still. In the theory of revealed preference, the chooser's wants are read off from the choices made, and the question of where those wants come from is ruled out of court rather than merely left unanswered, since nothing lies behind the choice that the theory is permitted to see. Need, in this lineage, is not explained and is not to be explained. It is the black box from which the whole apparatus draws its motive force.

Scarcity does not by itself supply the contents of that box. It explains the competition over limited means, and it cannot explain why one object rather than another comes to be wanted. Scarcity accounts for allocation. It does not account for constitution, and the constitution of the want is the question here. This is the point at which the received picture must be corrected, and corrected carefully, because the correction is easily mistaken for a familiar and weaker claim. The weaker claim divides needs into the true and the false, the natural and the artificial, and holds that a consumption economy inflames the false at the expense of the true. That division is not the one drawn here, and the account is built to avoid it. To sort needs into true and false is to occupy a position from which the genuine article can be told from the counterfeit, a position of survey above the relations in which need is actually formed, and no such position is available. The need for water and the need for a particular brand of water are not related as the real to the illusory. Both are needs, and both are constituted, organized into a wanted and pursued form within a relational and symbolic order. What distinguishes them is not that one is authentic and the other is not. It is the density of symbolic mediation each carries, the extent to which the form of the want is worked up out of signs. Thirst is lightly mediated and the need it grounds is close to its bodily occasion. The need for the mark of a life well lived is heavily mediated and stands at a distance from any occasion the body could name. Between these lies a continuous gradient, and the economy of a consumption society operates by moving need along it, toward the pole of dense mediation where the sign does the greater part of the constituting.

Every need is constituted within a relational and symbolic order. Needs are arranged along a gradient of symbolic mediation rather than sorted into the authentic and the manufactured, from the lightly mediated need close to its bodily occasion to the densely mediated need worked up almost entirely out of signs. A consumption economy operates by displacing need toward the densely mediated pole.

Read in this way, the received picture of the economy is seen to rest on a layer it does not theorize. The familiar cycle runs from scarcity to need, from need to the commodity that answers it, from the commodity to consumption, and from consumption to the accumulation that funds the next turn.

Scarcity → Need → Commodity → Consumption → Accumulation

The cycle presents need as its second term, following directly upon scarcity, as though the fact of limited means were enough to fix what is wanted. It is not. Before need, and constituting it, stands the sign. The cycle as actually operated has a term the diagram omits, and the omission is not innocent, since it is precisely the omitted term that the economy has learned to work.

Scarcity → Symbol → Need → Commodity → Consumption → Accumulation

Modern economics, then, does not merely presuppose need. It presupposes the symbolic labour by which need is constituted, and treats the product of that labour as a natural fact. The consequence is that the discipline is well equipped to describe the allocation of means to ends and poorly equipped to describe the making of the ends themselves, which is the process that a consumption economy has raised to the centre of its operation. This omission acquires its full significance from the fact that the omitted layer is precisely the one upon which the labour of the market has come to concentrate, for reasons the next sections make plain. The section that follows takes that process as its subject.

The result may be put in the discipline's own terms. Where economic models must treat the formation of need as exogenous, taking the want as given and beginning the analysis on the far side of its making, the account offered here finds that formation to be endogenous to the symbolic relations in which need is constituted. What the model must hold fixed, the symbolic order continually produces. The remainder of the paper follows that production.

3 THE SYMBOLIC PRODUCTION OF NEED

If need is constituted symbolically, the question is how the constituting is done, and by what mechanism a sign can bring a need into being rather than merely answer one already there. This section develops the answer in three movements. It sets out the machinery of symbolic need production as it operates in the ordinary institutions of a consumption economy. It then gives the mechanism its ground, drawing on the psychoanalytic account of desire to show why the production is structurally perpetual and not a contingent excess to be reformed away. It closes by placing the argument within the tradition of psychoanalytic critique of the economy, and marking at each station the point at which the present account moves beyond it.

3.1 THE MACHINERY

The institutions that produce need are familiar and need only be named to be recognized. Advertising is the oldest and most direct of them. The brand carries the work forward, attaching to

a good a settled identity that the good itself does not possess. The influencer lends a face and a life to the identity, so that it may be desired as something lived rather than merely claimed. The credential organizes need in the domain of work and standing, promising that the mark of an institution will secure the recognition it names. Social media distributes the whole apparatus into the texture of ordinary attention, and algorithmic recommendation learns each person's susceptibilities and returns to them the signs most likely to move them. These are not separate mechanisms. They are stages of a single operation, the operation by which a want is worked up out of a sign.

What the operation trades in is never the good as such. The lipstick is not sold as a pigment. It is sold as the entitlement to be found beautiful and, through beauty, to be loved. The automobile is not sold as conveyance. It is sold as the standing of one who has arrived. The cup of coffee is not sold as a stimulant. It is sold as membership in a certain form of urban life. In each case the good is a vehicle, and what rides upon it is a promise of recognition, of belonging, of worth in the eyes of others. Need issues from meaning, and meaning issues from the sign. The consumer does not lack the object and then desire it. The sign constitutes the consumer as lacking, and offers the object as the route by which the lack may be closed. These institutions succeed only because they operate upon a prior structure of subjectivity, one in which a lack is already open and a recognition is already sought. The structure of the offer is what the next movement must explain, because it is a structure in which the lack is never in fact closed, and the offer can therefore be made again without end.

3.2 THE GROUND OF THE MECHANISM

To see why symbolic need production can go on without limit, one must distinguish need from two things it is ordinarily confused with. The distinction is drawn most sharply in the psychoanalytic account of the subject, and three terms carry it: need, demand, and desire.

Need, in the strict sense, is the organism's requirement, satisfiable by an object. The infant needs nourishment, and milk meets the need. But the human infant cannot secure what it needs on its own, and must address its need to another, and this addressing changes everything. The moment need passes through a call to another it becomes demand, and demand is never only a demand for the object. It is always also a demand for the presence and the love of the one addressed, a demand to be answered as such. Demand is already symbolic. It is articulated in language and addressed within the order of signs, and this is what places it within reach of an instrument that works in signs. What the market can operate upon is the demand that has already entered speech, and not the mute requirement of the body. The object may be given and the need met, yet the demand for love exceeds any object that could be given, because what it asks for is a recognition without reserve, which no thing supplies. Desire is the name for this remainder. It is what is left of demand when the satisfiable need has been subtracted, and it does not have an object in the way a need has one. It has a cause, a something that sets it in motion and keeps it moving, and that cause is no particular good, being rather the very point at which every good falls short. Psychoanalysis calls this cause the object-cause of desire, the elusive term that seems to promise the closing of the lack and, by its nature, withdraws as one approaches it.

Need, demand, desire. *Need* is a requirement satisfiable by an object. *Demand*, which is need addressed to another in language, is always also a demand for the love of the one addressed, and so exceeds any object. *Desire* is the remainder of demand over need, without a proper object, set in motion by a cause that recedes as it is approached.

With this distinction the mechanism of symbolic need production becomes legible, and a terminological point must be faced directly, since the resolution of it is itself the argument. The socially produced “need” that this paper takes as its object is not need in the strict psychoanalytic sense. In those coordinates it falls in the region between demand and desire, in the remainder that no object completes. This is not a confusion to be cleared away but the very thing to be explained, for the core operation of symbolic need production is precisely to disguise that remainder as a need in the strict sense, to present the objectless cause of desire as though it were a want that a purchasable object could satisfy. The sign takes the recognition that demand asks for and cannot be given, binds it to a good, and offers the good as the answer. The consumer buys the good and the desire shifts, for a moment quieted, and then reopens, because what was asked for was never the good and the good could never have supplied it. The lack reopens, a new sign binds it to a new good, and the cycle turns. Symbolic need production is perpetual not because producers are insatiable but because it is parasitic on a structure that has no term, the structure of a desire that no object closes.

The perpetuity of symbolic need production is structural. It works upon the remainder of demand over need, the desire that no object completes, and disguises that remainder as a satisfiable need. Each purchase quiets the desire for a moment and each fails to close it, so that the production can renew itself without end. Its motive is the openness of a lack, and not the greed of producers.

This result is double-edged, and the second edge is the one the constructive part of the paper will take up. The openness of desire, its refusal to be closed by any object, is what the economy of symbolic need production exploits. It is also, under a different organization, the very condition of generativity, the reason a relation can go on producing rather than come to rest in a satisfied state. The non-closure of desire has two fates. It can be pumped from outside, held open so that value may be extracted from the repeated failure to close it, which is the fate the present section describes. Or it can be internally generative, the openness from which new capacity and new relation continually issue, which is the fate the later sections develop. The whole difference between the two economies the paper sets against one another turns on this fork, and a formal criterion for distinguishing the two will be given when the constructive account is reached.

3.3 THE GENEALOGY OF THE CRITIQUE

The argument to this point stands within a tradition, and owes that tradition an accounting. The critique of the economy by way of the theory of the subject rests, at bottom, on a Marxian ground, the analysis of the commodity as a thing that comes to bear a social relation as though it were a property of the thing itself. Onto that ground the psychoanalytic critique adds a dimension the original analysis did not develop, the dimension of desire, and asks how the commodity conceals a relation and, beyond that, how it captures a subject. Three stations of that addition bear on the present argument, and the account departs from each at a determinate point.

The first station is the diagnosis of false needs in the mid-century critique of industrial society. Its achievement was to see, and to say with force, that the economy of advanced industry installs needs rather than simply meeting them, binding the subject to the order that produces its wants. Its limit lies in the form in which it cast the insight. The distinction between true and false needs introduces a normative standpoint from which needs may be evaluated prior to the relations through which they come to be meaningful, a standpoint above the relations in which

needs are formed, and this the present account has already declined, for the reason given in the previous section. What the division requires is an evaluating position that surveys need from without and pronounces upon its authenticity, and no such position is to be had. The insight that the economy installs need is retained. The apparatus of authenticity that framed it is set aside.

The second station is the analysis of sign value in the theory of consumer society. This is the station nearest to the present argument, and the departure from it is correspondingly sharper. Its achievement was to carry the critique from the object to the sign, to show that what is consumed is a differential position within a system of signs and not the utility of a good, and so to bring the symbolic constitution of need into the centre of the analysis. Its limit is that it could not find its way back out of the sign. Having reduced the object to a sign and the sign to its difference from other signs, the analysis arrives at a closed circulation in which signs refer only to one another and to nothing beneath them, and from within that closure it can offer no exit, since there is by hypothesis nothing outside the play of signs from which an exit could be taken. The present account breaks the closure by refusing the reduction that produces it. Underlying the sign is a relational process rather than another object, the generative relation whose value the sign at its best carries and expresses and at its worst fails to carry. The symbolic crisis, on this reading, is the decoupling of signs from a relational value that is real and that can be generated, and not the vertigo of signs that refer to nothing. It is because that value is real that a way beyond the crisis can be found. Where the theory of sign value has the sign alone and no exit, the present account has the sign and the relational process it expresses, and in the second an exit.

The third station is the account of surplus enjoyment in the psychoanalytic critique of ideology. Its achievement was to give the mechanism this section has described its sharpest formulation, to show how ideology holds the subject by way of the object-cause of desire and the surplus of enjoyment wrung from the endlessly renewed failure to attain it, and to place that surplus alongside the surplus value of the economic analysis as its counterpart in the register of the subject. The present account takes this mechanism over directly. Its limit lies in what follows the diagnosis, which is very little, and not in the diagnosis, which is exact. The critique of surplus enjoyment is less concerned with constructing an alternative economic order than with exposing the mechanisms through which subjects are captured, and where it turns to construction it does so in the register of the ethics of desire and the singular resolution of the subject rather than in that of a value that a shared order might generate. The result, for the purposes of a theory of value, is a diagnosis without a construction, an analysis that can show the mechanism of capture with unmatched clarity and cannot show a form of value that would not be a captured one. It is exactly this that the constructive part of the present paper is written to supply.

The line can be stated compactly. The critique of false needs saw that need is installed and stayed caught in the division of the true from the false. The analysis of sign value reached the sign and stayed caught in the closure of the sign. The account of surplus enjoyment reached the mechanism and stayed caught in the diagnosis. Each is arrested at one point, and the frame developed here is built to move past all three, by keeping the mechanism the third supplies, adding to the sign the relational process the second leaves out, and supplying above the diagnosis the construction the whole tradition wants. The construction requires a criterion, and the criterion will not be drawn by asking whether desire is present, for desire is common to both the extractive and the generative system. It will be drawn by asking whether the openness of desire is organized toward extraction or toward the generation of new relational capacities. The next section prepares the way by pressing the diagnosis to its limit, and the sections that follow supply the criterion and the construction.

4 SYMBOLIC CRISIS AND SYMBOLIC INFLATION

The mechanism described in the previous section has a history, and the history has reached a particular point. Symbolic need production has always depended on the sign's capacity to carry a promise of recognition that the consumer will credit. That capacity is not constant. It can wear, and there is reason to hold that across a range of the signs on which the economy has relied it is now wearing badly. This section names the condition and gives it a measure.

The signs of the failing are visible wherever the economy has leaned most heavily on symbolic need production. The credential, once a reliable token of capacity and a warrant of the recognition due to capacity, is increasingly held even by those from whom the recognition is withheld, and the token is discounted accordingly. The brand, once able to confer a settled identity, meets a fatigue that no quantity of brand-work reverses, as the identity it offers is recognized as an offer. The influencer, whose whole value lay in seeming to live the life the sign named rather than to advertise it, is met with the same fatigue once the living is seen to be the advertising. The recommendation, which promised to return to each person exactly what would move them, produces a surfeit that dulls the very susceptibility it feeds upon. And the recent capacity to generate signs without limit and at negligible cost, by automated means, floods the channels with tokens that carry no relation behind them at all. In each case the same thing is happening. The sign is decoupling from what it was supposed to carry.

4.1 THE UNIT OF ACCOUNT

To call this an inflation is to make a claim that must be earned, for inflation is a precise phenomenon and not a loose figure for decline. One point must be settled before the claim is made, since the whole of the argument turns on it. The difficulty is not the quantity of signs as such. A society may generate signs in abundance without crisis, so long as those signs remain coupled to the generative relations whose value they carry. The crisis begins when symbolic production expands independently of value generation, when the sign is produced faster than the relation it was to express. What follows is an account of that decoupling, and not a complaint against the multiplication of signs.

A currency inflates when its supply runs ahead of the goods against which it can be redeemed, so that each unit commands less. The figure carries over only if there is a corresponding thing against which the sign is redeemed, a unit of account in which the sign's devaluation can be reckoned. There is such a thing, and naming it is what keeps the term from being a metaphor. The sign is redeemed against the relational value it carries. A credential is worth the recognition that the relation between capacity and standing will actually honour. A brand is worth the belonging it can actually deliver. A sign's value is the relational value it can make good on, and its devaluation is the shortfall of that redemption.

The relational value against which a sign is redeemed is not an impression and can be given a formal character, drawn from earlier work in this programme. A relation that generates value carries, over a cycle that returns to its starting configuration, a surplus that the return does not cancel, a holonomy that is positive when the cycle generates value internally and is zero or negative when it does not. Put less formally, positive holonomy names the surplus capacity a relation leaves behind after it has reproduced itself, the increment of capability or trust or relation that the cycle returns with and did not begin with. The sign at its best is the carrier and the record of such a surplus, the token by which a positive holonomy in some relation is made portable and recognizable. A credential that carries real relational value is the record of a formation that generated capacity. A brand that carries it is the record of a relation that delivered what it promised. When the sign is issued in excess of any such surplus, when tokens

are multiplied beyond the relational value there is to carry, the redemption rate falls. Each sign, on average, makes good on less. This is inflation in a structural sense, an oversupply of the token relative to the relational value against which it is expected to be redeemed, and that relational value is one with a positive holonomy behind it.

Symbolic inflation. The condition in which the supply of signs runs ahead of the relational value they can redeem, so that the redemption rate of the sign, the relational value each sign on average makes good on, falls. The unit of account against which the sign is measured is relational value with a positive holonomy behind it, the internally generated surplus of a value-generating cycle.

4.2 THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

Symbolic inflation is self-aggravating, and this is what makes it a crisis rather than a mere depreciation. When a class of signs begins to lose its redemption, the response available within the logic of symbolic need production is to issue more signs, faster, and of new kinds, since it is only through the sign that need is produced and only the production of need that keeps the cycle turning. But the new signs are issued into the same shortfall of relational value that devalued the old ones, and they decouple in their turn, and often faster, having been minted precisely to replace what had already failed. The acceleration that is meant to restore the sign's power instead spreads the decoupling. The more the sign fails, the faster it is reissued; the faster it is reissued, the further it decouples from relational value; the further it decouples, the more it fails. The order of symbolic need production, driven to produce need by the only means it has, drives itself toward the limit at which the means no longer works. The acceleration is not accidental. It follows from the imperative of realization set out in the earlier account, which requires the circuit to go on producing convertible demands at the speed of its turnover, and so requires the sign to be reissued whatever its rate of redemption. The pressure that drives the labour of the market onto need is the same pressure that drives the reissue of the sign, and it does not relent as the sign decouples.

Sign fails → reissue faster → decouple further → sign fails

This is the sense in which the title speaks of a limit. The order does not arrive at a moment of collapse after which signs no longer function. It approaches a condition in which the production of need by the sign becomes progressively less reliable, in which more and more symbolic labour purchases less and less constituted need, and in which the value cycle that begins from need is starved at its source. The diagnosis, pressed this far, exposes what it cannot itself remedy. If the difficulty is that the sign has decoupled from relational value, then the remedy cannot lie in the sign, and cannot lie in the production of need at all. It must lie in the relational value underlying the sign, in the generativity from which that value comes. To that the argument now turns.

5 VALUE, GENERATIVITY, AND THE INDIRECT REACH OF CAPITAL

The diagnosis to this point has followed the labour of the market where that labour is most direct, upon need, and has traced it to the limit named symbolic inflation. A question has stood beside the whole of that account without being answered. If the production of need through the sign is reaching the edge of what it can do, why does the market not simply turn to value, and work value as it has worked need. The answer is that value does not submit to the instrument

that works need, and the reason it does not is the subject of this section. It develops the second half of the claim from which the paper set out, that need is operationalizable in a way value is not, and it shows that the difference is a difference in form, open to exact statement, and not a matter of degree.

5.1 WHY VALUE RESISTS DIRECT OPERATION

The operability of need through the sign rests, as the earlier account showed, on the immediacy with which a symbolic promise can be issued and a purchase can appear to redeem it. The sign binds the object-cause of desire to a good, the good is bought, the desire is quieted for a moment, and the transaction closes. The closure is immediate and it is complete within the single turn, whatever reopens afterward. A clarification is needed here, because the point is easily mistaken. Need is not in itself a cycle of zero holonomy. A want met may open into a lasting relation, as a shared meal may begin a friendship or a course of care may build a trust, and where it does the cycle carries a surplus like any other generative one. What has zero holonomy is need as the symbolic market organizes it, need reduced to a transactional form in which the good is bought and the matter is closed. In the terms of the criterion developed in earlier work in this programme, need in its marketized symbolic form is organized as a cycle that returns to its starting configuration within a single transactional step, a single completed purchase, carrying no surplus that the return does not cancel, a cycle of zero holonomy that the sign can open and close at will. It is this organized form, and not need as such, that the analysis concerns.

Value, in the generative sense this programme gives it, has another form. It is not issued and redeemed in a single step. It is generated over a cycle of many steps, path-dependent and irreversible in its order, in which what is produced at each stage becomes the condition of what may be produced at the next, and the return to the starting configuration carries a surplus that the return does not cancel. This is the positive holonomy that marks a generative cycle. A capacity formed, a trust established, a relation deepened, none of these is delivered in a stroke, and none can be bound to a good and discharged by a purchase, because each is the outcome of a passage through time that no single symbolic act can stand in for. The generativity of value is its resistance to the sign. What can be coded and redeemed in one step, the sign can produce. What requires a path of many steps to generate, the sign can promise and cannot deliver, and the promise, made too often, is exactly what devalues in symbolic inflation.

Need as the symbolic market organizes it is operable through the sign because its cycle closes in a single transactional step and carries no surplus, a cycle of zero holonomy the sign can open and close. Value in its generative sense is not so operable, because it is generated over a path of many steps whose return carries a surplus that no single step delivers, a cycle of positive holonomy. The generativity of value is the formal ground of its resistance to direct symbolic operation.

5.2 THE INDIRECT REACH

Capital is not turned away by this resistance. It reaches value still, and the manner of the reaching is set by the resistance it meets. What cannot be produced in a single symbolic step, and so cannot be worked at the speed of the market's ordinary transaction, can be worked at another speed and by another means, through the slow reshaping of the conditions under which value is generated at all. Capital does not produce the generative value directly. It reconfigures the relational fields in which generative value comes to be, so that what those fields generate is turned, over the longer term, to its account. The forms of this reach are familiar once they

are named. There is the shaping of culture in its several registers, the corporate, the commercial, the social, and the national, each a configuration of the meanings within which valuing takes place. There is education, through which the dispositions that generate value are formed. There is the media, through which the field of common attention is held and turned. And there is the entry into the early formation of the subject, the stage at which the capacity to value is itself in the making. This last must be stated with care. Capital does not determine the subject, and the account intends nothing so total. It reorganizes the relational ecology within which the formation of the subject proceeds, and works upon the conditions of that formation rather than upon its outcome. These are the indirect means, and they share a character. They do not operate upon value as the sign operates upon need. They operate upon the relational ecology from which value issues.

That this indirect reach is a reach of power, and not a neutral provision of cultural goods, is a point on which the tradition of political economy has long insisted. The holding of the field of common meaning, the securing of a general consent within which a particular order of value comes to seem the natural one, is the work that has been called cultural hegemony, and the indirect reach of capital into value proceeds in large part by this work. The two accounts operate at different levels and should not be run together. Hegemony explains the stabilization of a particular order of meaning as the dominant one. The present argument concerns the conditions under which meanings generate or fail to generate value, a question that stands prior to the question of which meanings prevail. The concentration of the direct labour of the market upon need does not therefore leave value untouched. It leaves value approached by other means, slower and deeper, whose analysis belongs to the study of culture, of education, and of subject formation as much as to the study of the market.

The full development of that analysis is not undertaken here, and one part of it has been carried out elsewhere in this programme, in the account of how the formation of the subject proceeds within a relational ecology that capital reconfigures rather than commands. It is enough for the present argument to have established the point of form on which the whole rests. Need in its marketized form submits to the sign because its cycle is of zero holonomy and closes in a step. Value resists the sign because its generativity is of positive holonomy and requires a path. The market works need directly and reaches value only indirectly for this reason, and the reason is legible in the form of the two cycles. With this the claim from which the paper set out is complete in both its halves, and the way is open to the reading of value that the resistance of value to the sign has all along implied.

6 BEYOND NEED: GENERATIVITY AS ANOTHER FOUNDATION OF VALUE

The resistance of value to the sign, established in the previous section, has already told us something of what value is. A thing that cannot be issued and redeemed in a single symbolic step, that requires a path of many steps to generate and carries a surplus its return does not cancel, is a thing of a particular kind, and this section asks after that kind directly. If the sign has decoupled from the relational value it was supposed to carry, then a theory that begins from need, and treats the production of need as the assumed origin of value, has lost its ground. The way forward proposed here is to descend beneath the sign rather than to repair it, to the relational value from which the sign at its best drew its worth, and to ask what that value is and how it comes to be. The answer developed here is that value, at its source, may be regarded as generative rather than repletive, where repletive names a cycle organized around the filling of an absence and generative a cycle organized around the production of a surplus, so that value is seen as arising from what a relation produces rather than from a lack a good fills, and

that need may be placed as one state within such a relational system rather than as its origin. The argument proceeds from examples to their common structure, and from the structure to a criterion.

Generativity. Generativity is the capacity of a relational process to produce new capabilities, relations, and conditions of further production beyond the configuration from which it begins. Its formal mark is the positive holonomy of the cycle it drives, the surplus with which the cycle returns to its root and did not begin.

6.1 THE EXAMPLES

Consider a range of relational forms in which value is plainly produced and just as plainly does not begin from a manufactured need. The rearing of a child is the clearest of them. A child is not valuable because it answers a lack in those who raise it, and the relation of care does not run by supplying a deficit. This is not to say that care contains no satisfaction, or that relations do not answer human needs, for plainly they do. The point is that the value of the relation cannot be reduced to the closure of a prior lack. The relation runs by generating, over years, capacities that were not there before, in the child and in those around it, and by opening relations that did not exist, to kin, to teachers, to a widening world. What the relation produces becomes in turn the ground of further production, as the capacities generated make new relations possible and the new relations generate further capacities. An open-source community has the same shape. It is organized around a contribution to be made rather than a scarcity to be allocated, and each contribution, far from depleting a stock, enlarges the common resource and the capacity of the community to contribute again. Care for the sick and the old, when it is not reduced to the delivery of a service, generates a relational capacity, a trust and a knowledge between carer and cared-for, that is the very substance of the good it provides. Cooperative childrearing, the community garden, the transmission of a craft from one generation of hands to the next, all share the feature. In each, participation in the relation produces a capacity, the capacity opens a further relation, and the further relation grounds a further production. Value here does not close a lack. It widens a generative capacity.

6.2 THE COMMON STRUCTURE

These examples are not a list of pleasant exceptions to the economy of need. They share a structure, and the structure can be made exact. Each is a cycle that returns to its starting configuration, the family that raises another child, the community that takes up another project, the craft passed to another apprentice, and each returns bearing a surplus that the return does not cancel. The family that has raised a child is not the family it was, the community that has completed a project holds a capacity it did not hold, the craft transmitted lives in a hand that did not before possess it. In the language of the earlier work in this programme, the cycle carries a positive holonomy. It comes back to its root and does not come back to its origin, because it comes back changed, and the change is the value generated. The repletive cycle of need and consumption has the opposite character. It too returns to its starting configuration, the want reopened, the purchase to be made again, but it returns bearing no surplus, or a deficit, the same lack reinstated so that it may be sold to again. Its holonomy is zero or negative. It comes back to its origin and has generated nothing, or has generated only the renewed need on which its next turn depends.

A generative cycle returns to its root bearing an internally generated surplus that the return does not cancel, a positive holonomy, and this surplus is value. A repletive cycle returns to its origin bearing no surplus or a deficit, a zero or negative holonomy, and reinstates the lack on which its next turn depends. What distinguishes the two economies is the sign of the holonomy their cycles carry, and not the goods that pass through them.

This is the criterion the earlier argument promised, and it resolves the fork left open when the openness of desire was found to have two fates. Desire does not close, and its non-closure can be turned to either account. The repletive cycle holds the openness open from outside and extracts value from the repeated failure to close it, pumping the lack so that it may be sold to again, and its holonomy is negative because what it returns is less than what it took, the difference drawn off as the extracted value. The generative cycle lets the openness be the source from which new capacity and new relation issue, and its holonomy is positive because the return carries a surplus internally made. The same structural fact, that desire has no final object, is in the one case a wound kept open for extraction and in the other a spring that does not run dry. The distinction between the two economies is therefore not a distinction between desire and its satisfaction, since desire is common to both. It is a distinction between two organizations of the openness that desire leaves, the one holding it open to draw value off, the other letting it generate value in return. The whole difference between the economy of symbolic need production and the economy the programme proposes lies in which use is made of the openness, and the sign of the holonomy is the formal mark of the difference.

6.3 THE GENERATIVE CYCLE

The economy that follows from this can be set beside the one diagrammed earlier. Where the economy of need runs from scarcity through the sign to need, commodity, consumption, and accumulation, and reinstates the need at each turn, the generative economy runs otherwise.

Relationship → Participation → Generative process
→ Capability → New relationship → Further generativity

The cycle returns to an enlarged capacity rather than to a reinstated lack, and the enlargement is the value. It is worth marking how close this comes to an existing line of thought and where it goes beyond it. The account of development as the expansion of capability, which measures a life by what a person is able to be and to do rather than by what they hold, already refuses to locate value in the possession of goods and already looks to a generative rather than a repletive measure. The present account joins it and takes one further step. The account of development as the expansion of capability takes the capability of an individual, the set of functionings a person is able to achieve, as the unit in which a life is assessed, and it attends closely to the social arrangements on which those functionings depend. The child's capacities are the family's generativity settled in a person. The craftsman's skill is the craft's transmission come to rest in a hand. The present account extends the capability insight by shifting the ontological location of capability. Capability is not in the first place a possession of an individual. It emerges from a relational field and remains sustained by it, and the individual bears it as their share in a relation that exceeds them. Capability is the individual's participation in a generativity that is not, in the first place, theirs.

7 RETHINKING ECONOMIC VALUE BEYOND SCARCITY

The two economies set side by side make it possible to state the paper's proposal at the level of the starting point, and to state it without the recklessness that such statements invite. The received view may be read as holding that value begins with need. The view proposed here is that value may equally be regarded as beginning with generativity, and that need is better placed as one state within a relational system than as the system's sole origin. This proposal leaves the received view in place and offers one starting point to stand beside the others. It is a considerable proposal even so, and its size obliges the account to meet the objection it most immediately provokes, for the objection goes to the heart of what a theory of value is answerable to.

The objection is that scarcity is a fact to be reckoned with rather than a premise to be dispensed with, and that a theory which sets need aside as the origin of value has forgotten the hungry. The child without food, the family without shelter, the community without clean water, do not lack a symbolically constituted recognition. They lack the thing itself, and their need is a want that presses on the body and will not be theorized away, and no mere state within a relational system. A theory of generativity that could not speak to this would be an indulgence, a philosophy of value for those who have enough.

The objection is serious and the answer to it must be exact. The account does not deny scarcity, and does not hold that material want is unreal or that the pressing of hunger on the body is a symbolic effect. Where there is not enough, there is not enough, and the first thing owed is the thing that is lacking. What the account denies is something else, that scarcity is the origin of value, the term from which a theory of value must begin. These are different claims, and the objection runs them together. To say that a hungry child must be fed is a claim about what is owed. To say that the value of feeding the child begins from the child's lack is a claim about where value originates, and it is the second claim, not the first, that the account rejects. For consider what the feeding is. It is not the transfer of a quantum of nourishment to a deficit, after which the relation is complete and the value discharged. It is the beginning, or the continuation, of a relation of care, which generates, beyond the meeting of the want, a capacity and a trust and a widening of the child's world, and which grounds the further relations through which the child comes to be a person who can in turn generate. The account does not diminish the immediate value of relief. The provision of food has value precisely because it enters and sustains a relation of care, and the value of that act cannot be exhausted by the disappearance of hunger. The want is met, and in the meeting of it a generativity is set going, and it is the generativity, and not the want alone, that is the value's source. The lack marks where the generative relation must begin. It is not what the relation is for.

The account does not deny scarcity or the reality of material want. It denies that scarcity is the origin of value. Where there is want, the want is to be met, and the meeting of it is the point at which a generative relation begins rather than the whole of the value it bears. What distinguishes an economy is not whether it faces want, since every economy does. It is whether the economy is organized to answer want in a repletive manner, discharging a deficit and reinstating it, or in a generative manner, from which capacity and relation continue to issue.

Seen in this way, the question that divides the two economies is how a society is organized to answer want, and not whether want exists, since it exists in both. A repletive organization treats the want as a deficit to be discharged and, discharging it, reinstates the conditions of the next deficit, so that the answering of want becomes itself a turning of the cycle of need. A

generative organization treats the meeting of want as the ground of a relation that generates beyond it, so that the answering of want enlarges a capacity rather than merely resetting a lack. The same hunger can be met in either manner. The measure of an economy is which manner it institutes, and this is a question that the theory of value as the allocation of the scarce cannot so much as pose, because it has fixed the want as the origin and can ask only how efficiently the origin is served. Scarcity explains why action must begin. It does not explain why value emerges, and the difference between the two questions is the space in which this paper has worked.

Need, then, is relocated rather than removed. It keeps its place as a real and pressing state, and loses its place as the origin of value. It is one configuration a relational system can be in, the configuration of a lack that presses to be met, and the meeting of it is one moment in the life of a generativity that neither begins nor ends there. In this the proposal stands close to the capability approach in development economics, which measures a life by what a person is able to be and to do, and it moves one step from that approach by shifting the location of capability from an individual possession to a relationally generated capacity, so that the meeting of want is assessed by the generative relation it begins. A theory that takes generativity as the origin does not look past the hungry. It looks at the feeding of the hungry and sees in it the closing of a deficit and, beyond that, the beginning of the relation from which a life that can generate will come. The theory of value beyond scarcity is not a theory for a world that has escaped want. It is a theory of what the meeting of want is for, in a world that has not.

8 CONCLUSION

The argument set out from a premise that economic practice embodies though economic theory does not generally articulate it, that in the working of the economy need comes before value, and has tried to show that the premise is neither innocent nor secure. It is not innocent, because the greater part of what a consumption economy treats as need is symbolically constituted, produced rather than found, and the production works upon a desire that no object closes, which is why it can go on without end. It is not secure, because the symbolic order that produces need is losing its capacity to do so reliably, running its signs ahead of the relational value they can redeem, in a symbolic inflation that aggravates itself as it tries to relieve itself. Pressed to its limit, the diagnosis pointed beneath the sign, to a relational value that is real and that can be generated, and there the argument found a foundation the received view does not have. Value, in the account developed here, is generative at its source. It arises from what a relation produces, from a cycle that returns to its root bearing an internally generated surplus, and need is one state within such a system rather than its origin.

The account does not close on a doctrine, and the form of its close is required by its content. A frame that locates value in generativity rather than in a fixed origin cannot end by installing a new fixed origin in the old one's place, a new master term from which all else is to be derived. It ends, instead, on the questions that a generative economics would have to take up, and it offers them as openings rather than as a programme to be executed. There is the question of measure, of how a generativity that is relational at its source and carries a surplus a return does not cancel might be reckoned, when the instruments of measure were built to count the allocation of the scarce. There is the question of institution, of what forms of holding and governing and providing would answer want in the generative manner rather than the repletive one, and of how they might be built within an order arranged for the other. There is the question of the sign, of whether a symbolic order could be reconstituted so as to carry relational value rather than decouple from it, or whether the tie between sign and relation, once loosened, admits of

a different repair. And there is the question that stands behind the others, of what an economy would be, in its aims and its measures and its institutions, if it took as its first concern the way generative relations continue to create new capacities, meanings, and forms of value, in place of the way scarce means are allocated to given ends.

One direction economic theory may take lies less in asking how scarce resources satisfy given needs than in understanding how generative relationships continuously create new capacities, meanings, and forms of value.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The criterion developed in this paper draws on the concept of generative justice, for which the author is indebted to the work of Ron Eglash. The use made of it here is the author's own.

The author owes a further debt, beyond what citation can record, to the one whose companionship sustained this work.

REFERENCES

- [1] Huang, W. (2025). *Responding to the Crises of Symbol and Subject in Modernity: Towards a Generative Nomos of Relational Presence*. SSRN. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5752104>
- [2] Huang, W. (2026). *Relational Value under the Symbolic Crisis*. Knowledge Commons. <https://doi.org/10.17613/bm32z-aqt14>
- [3] Huang, W. (2026). *The Relational Mode of Being of Concepts: Towards a Generative Relational Epistemology*. Serendip Commons Society. GRB Series.
- [4] Huang, W. (2026). *Towards a Generative Relational Theory of Subject Formation: A Preliminary Inquiry into Early Development*. Serendip Commons Society. GRB Series.
- [5] Huang, W. (2026). *The Mediation of Lack: The Feminine Position and the Structure of the Subject in Lacan*. Serendip Commons Society. GRB Series.
- [6] Eglash, R. (2016). An introduction to generative justice. *Teknokultura*, 13(2), 369–404.
- [7] Robbins, L. (1932). *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*. Macmillan.
- [8] Samuelson, P. A. (1938). A note on the pure theory of consumer's behaviour. *Economica*, 5(17), 61–71.
- [9] Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- [10] Lacan, J. (1966). *Écrits*. Éditions du Seuil.
- [11] Lacan, J. (1978). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (A. Sheridan, Trans.; J.-A. Miller, Ed.). W. W. Norton.
- [12] Marcuse, H. (1964). *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Beacon Press.
- [13] Baudrillard, J. (1981). *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (C. Levin, Trans.). Telos Press.

- [14] Baudrillard, J. (1998). *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (C. Turner, Trans.). Sage.
- [15] Žižek, S. (1989). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso.
- [16] Marx, K. (1976 [1867]). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One* (B. Fowkes, Trans.). Penguin.
- [17] Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith, Eds. & Trans.). International Publishers.