

# Consequences of Needs Distributions on Social Stratification:

## Maslow and Marx Refined

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**Abstract**—This paper shows the fundamental, yet overlooked relations between the theory of needs and the theory of social stratification. The distributions of human needs and the synthesis between these distributions and social stratification suggests that hierarchical representations that are attributed to Maslow and Marx on needs and classes cause a misunderstanding on relative proportions of the needs and classes in the society.

**Keywords**—Hierarchical needs, social stratification, normal distributions, Abraham Maslow, Karl Marx.

### I. Introduction

Human needs, wants and choices are few of very fundamental social phenomena and small differences of viewpoints in these concepts can bring about a completely different understanding of human nature and science conducting research on society. If, for instance, needs are universal, some may argue that collective manufacture and distribution of goods and services are plausible or necessary to satisfy them. On the other hand, if they are not common in or between societies, there is no choice according to Doyal and Gough (1991) other than market mechanisms in order to let the individual relativity shape the public policies of the social life.

Doyal and Gough (1991) also provide a list of various viewpoints to the human needs that see needs as: i) dangerous, ii) historical, iii) group specific, iv) discursive, v) socially constructed, vi) preferences. However, as Rodriguez (2010) mentions, no economic system fully internalize these perspectives. In a sense, none of the poles of the discussion on human needs can fully convince world governments in twenty-first century because it is possible to show both macro plans and individual choices in any given economic system.

However, consequences of these perspectives on human needs are immense because need fulfillment is an ‘a priori’ discussion compared to social classes in social sciences. In fact, even one simple conflicting perspective on the universality of human needs could be tantamount to either full-fledged class conflict with various groups of needs or a classless society with uniform needs.

This paper, hence, analyses and systemizes the fundamental theoretical relations between human needs and the social classes. It turns out that the economic conditions, social stratum and class dynamics in a given society are almost direct consequences of micro founded theory of human needs. Using these fundamental relations between human needs and social classes in a given society, we investigate their claims by taking the relationship as the primary criteria and the theoretical similarities as secondary criteria. We find that this switch of priority reveals an ability to improve both of the theories.

### II. The Needs and Social Classes

#### A. The Needs and Their Priority Order

There are many discussions about human needs but very few of them analyze the relations between these needs and the social stratification, despite the fact that this relationship has many implications on social theory, economy theory, sociology, public administration and other related fields. Many of these discussions are polarized as well. For instance, many scholars, probably affected by the power discussions between governments, either argue that individual choices can be sacrificed for the common good or that common good is just irrelevant when compared to liberal choices of individuals that named as externalities. It is indeed more rational to argue that both has relevance as Doyal and Harris (1986: 80) argue “it is fundamentally mistaken to view yourself as acting with total self-sufficiency –by yourself and for yourself- without reference to anyone else”.

In many ways, discussions about the real meaning of needs, whether wants are considered to be needs or whether we have enough resources to satisfy those needs are leading to the same conclusion when we confine our discussion on the relationship between needs and social stratification because wants could equally be argued to be universal or not and humankind has always the choice of over-consuming. This is why we can avoid further introductory discussions on human needs.

In social sciences, research community does not frequently agree upon certain concepts and their characteristics. However, ‘human needs’ is one of such rare concepts because the kinds and hierarchical levels of fundamentality of human needs are agreed upon in the literature by many researchers. The *needs* are put in very similar hierarchical orders by Alderfer (1972), Herzberg (1959), McClelland *et al.* (1953) and Maslow (1954). These scholars suggested ‘ERT Theory’, ‘Two-Function Theory’, ‘Theory of Learned Needs’ and

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‘Needs Theory’ of hierarchical orders of needs, respectively. These theories and their corresponding positions about hierarchical human needs can be seen in Fig. 1. This figure is important because it shows most of the important theories of needs hierarchy in a very efficient way.

Please note that in almost all of the models presented in Fig. 1, basic needs which are required for sustainable living conditions, are at the bottom of all of the scales and needs that can be nominated as wants are at the top of the scales. Let us now embrace one of these models to show the relationships between human needs and social classes.

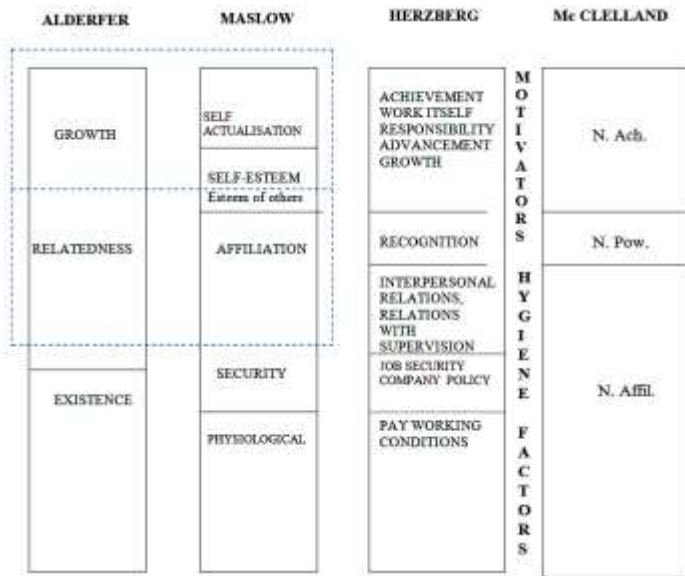


Figure 1: Famous Ordinal Scales of Motivation in Psychology<sup>1</sup>  
Source: Rollinson et al. (1998: 163).

The best candidate would be Maslow’s (1954) model because, this model is one of the most frequently cited theories of needs. As seen in Fig. 1, the basic idea of the theory is supported by all of the other theories depicted in the Fig. 1. The model Maslow (1954) proposes is mostly depicted in a pyramid form, as seen in Fig. 2, probably because of the perceived parallelism between the hierarchy and pyramid forms.



Figure 2: Triangular Hierarchy of Needs  
Source: Maslow (2010)

The bottom part of the Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs comprise of material needs. Despite the fact that the lowest need is named ‘physiological’ needs in Fig. 1, it comprises of the needs like food, clothing etc. that are necessary for human survival and body functioning. The second layer at the bottom also represents material needs such as personal and financial security, health etc. The second part of the Maslow’s (2010) model is in fact very similar to the upper part of social needs. This similarity is very clear according to Rollinson et al. (1998: 163). In fact, Llewellyn (1940), Harris P. (1999), Llewellyn and Hoebel (1941) and many others from various backgrounds also agree that “every social group has some basic needs” (Harris, 1999: 4). This information links the research on individual needs and the needs of the society which is bluntly a sum of the individuals. In fact, it is common knowledge that Maslow’s (1954) theory is very commonly referred to by sociologists as well as psychologists.

### B. Social Classes and Their Priority Order

Plamenatz (1963: 293-4) argues that: “the class a man belongs to ... depends on whether or not he owns property and on the type of property he owns”. According to Lipton (1978: 109), Marxists and anti-Marxists are not in conflict on this definition.

In social sciences literature, until the criticism of Marxists and neo Marxists, detailed analysis of stratification was rather weak and studies were providing a blunt picture although the basic idea existed in every human society. For instance Berki (1975: 57) states that Marx’s “pivotal doctrine of the ‘class straggle’ is but a more coherent, systematized expression of the classical conception of the conflict between the rich and the poor”.

Existence of hierarchical social classes is a well-established concept not only in Eurocentric literature but Muslim scholars, such as Naqvi (1994: 74), also recognizes the classes of “*mustadafin*” (oppressed) and “*mustakbarin*” (oppressor). Nevertheless, some corrections are necessary on this perspective because Islamic law determines clear-cut materially defined breaking points between rich and poor and assumes the middle by a well-known notion known as ‘*nisab*’ or the ‘threshold income’ above which one is subject to *zakah*, or mandatory alms giving. *Nisab* does not divide between rich and poor but between rich and not-rich because not all of the population below the *nisab* level can receive *zakah* in Islamic law. *Zakah* is mainly given to poor people or people in need. In Islam, there is a big group of people in the society for whom the *zakah* discussions are irrelevant. When an individual has 90.18 gr. of gold or equivalent of money and wealth waiting for the whole year he/she gives *zakah*. However, if one has 75 gr. of gold and no more excess wealth waiting for the whole year except for the regular expenses this person neither gives nor receives *zakah*. Indeed the number of these people is not few in Muslim societies. This stratum of the society in Islam claims more than two distinct economic strata and thus negates Naqvi (1994), not for political reasons but for economic reasons.

<sup>1</sup> Ach: achievement, Pow: power, Affil: affiliation.

### C. Relations between Human Needs and Social Classes

Let us now show the relations between human needs and social class structures. Fig. 3 gives a visual explanation. It is not surprising to realize that different social classes have different needs and that the hierarchical needs theory of Maslow (1954) is valid for societies as well as individuals.

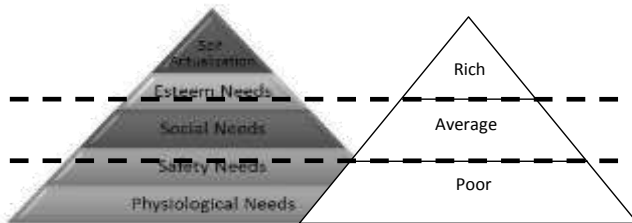


Figure 3: Hierarchy of Social Classes with Corresponding Needs

Modern research on human needs appeared relatively lately compared to the studies on social classes and political discussions did not appear in all human societies but has been observable in the public sphere especially after the abolishment of slavery. Probably because of these late developments in social sciences, research community did not lean on the relationships between human needs and social stratification in the society.

Lipton (1978: 109) agrees that the literature discusses whether or not properties are owned but understresses the relationship between the type of the property ownership and social stratification.

Let us now turn our attention to the distribution of human needs and their corresponding stratification distributions using the normal and non-normal statistical distribution curves.

### III. Meaning of normality and normal distribution of wealth in social sciences

The conception of Marx (1969) is not irrelevant to modern discussions because modern, everyday discourses like first class flight ticket, seat, service is not only about being rich, but the explicit social recognition, valuation and differentiation of it from the other members of the society. Berki (1975), Naqvi (1994) and similar others would agree that there is the super-rich (Irvin, 2008) and super-poor (Evatt Foundation, 1991) in the society, along with rich and poor, at extreme distances, away from 'nisab', or wage labour.

Macionis and Plummer (2008: 306) give the following distribution from Runciman (1990) about the social classes in Britain: Upper class is made up of 'upper-upper class': 0.2 – 0.1% and 'lower upper class': less than 10%; middle class comprises of 'upper middle' and 'service class': 15% and 'lower middle class': 20%, working class is made up of

'skilled working class': 20% and 'unskilled working class': 30%; underclass is 5%.

When we combine them we come up with approximately 10% for upper class, 35% (15+20) for middle class and 55% (20+30+5) working and under classes. If we combine working class and underclass and attempt to visualize these numbers, we realize that it makes a pyramid as presented in Fig. 4. We add some of the closer numbers together, because this is the trend in the literature. For instance, Giddens (2006) questions the existence of the underclass. Aside from the real numbers, suggested by many studies, the impression and the perception in the field of sociology is that the poor is not better than any class in the society and is worse than all others.

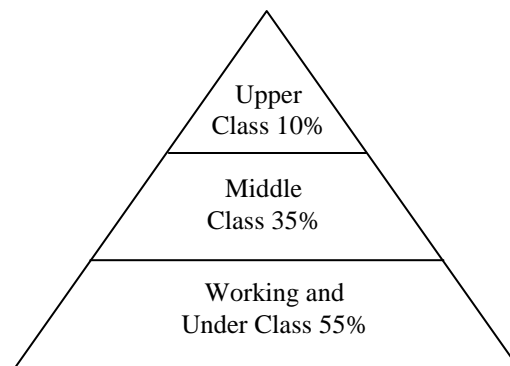


Figure 4: Proportions of Social Classes when Forced to a Pyramid Shape  
Source: Adapted from Runciman (1990)

In any case, we normally expect that the distribution of wealth is not positively skewed, but normally distributed with a variety of different means and variances in market societies because market societies claim to be meritocracies and all the abilities and qualities of the human-beings are normally distributed. This is not exactly the case in socialist societies because they assume and want to realize an equal distribution of wealth and income in the society. However, since 1980s, in the age of transitions to market systems, one could safely assume a normal distribution with very low variance for socialist countries as well.

Thus, normal distribution, with or without small variances, must be the 'norm', the standard, for the distribution of wealth and income in all meritocracies because every ability of the individuals is normally distributed, and they are announced as living in meritocracies.

A better corresponding image of a normal distribution to the hierarchical distributions would be a diamond shape because it allows a symmetrical two-tailed distribution of both classes and hierarchical needs in our case.

However, the statistical representation of the current theories suggests an almost nonlinear distribution with one tail completely disappeared as presented in Fig. 5.

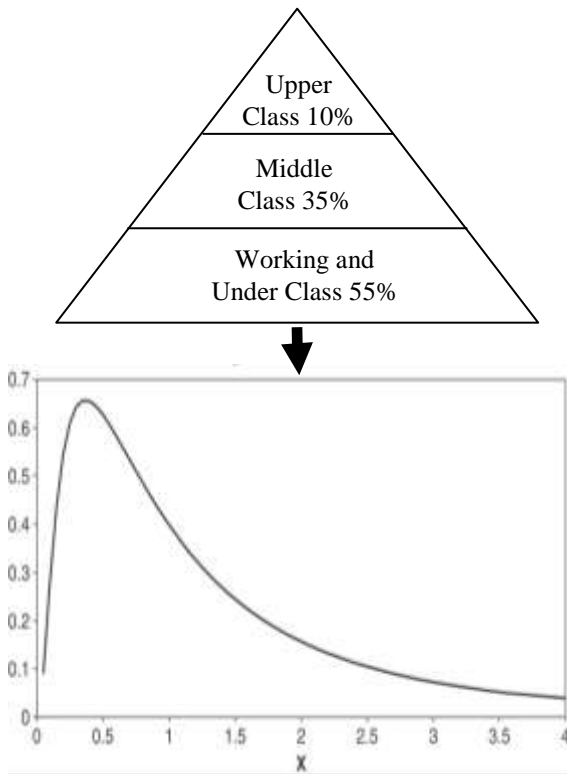


Figure 5: Social Classes and Their Corresponding Normal

The symmetric and mathematically, statistically, empirically better representation of the reality is depicted in Fig. 6.

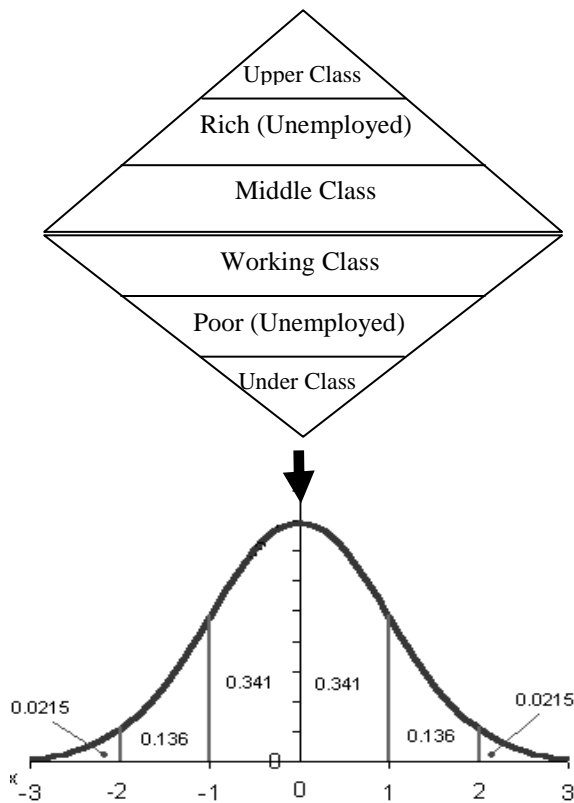


Figure 6: Social Classes and Their Corresponding Normal

Superimposed views in Fig. 7 and Fig. 8 may provide a better comprehension.

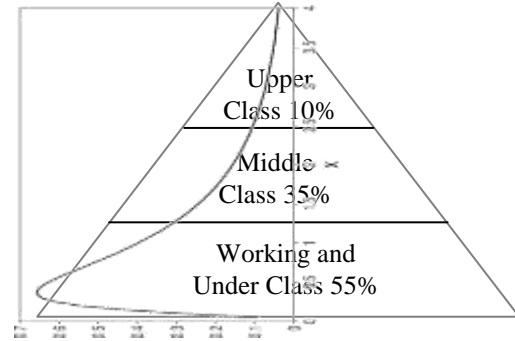


Figure 7: Social Classes and Their Corresponding Superimposed Normal Distributions and Non-Normal Distributions

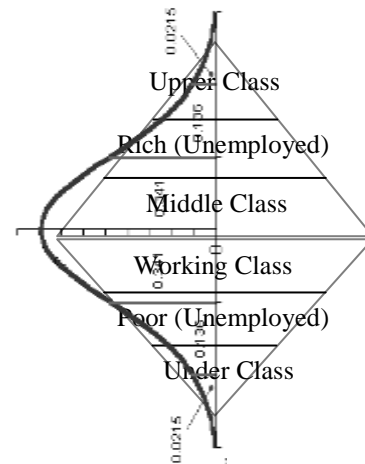


Figure 8: Social Classes and Their Corresponding Superimposed Normal Distributions and Non-Normal Distributions

As seen in Fig. 7, if we leave underclass (5%) as it is suggested by Runciman (1990), remembering that the upper upper-class was .1 - .2 % only we may realize that there was a positively skewed normal distribution of social classes in Britain as bare statistics very clearly represents. Nevertheless, theories of stratification and needs distributions do not follow the empirical data.

Reminding ourselves that all social data are normally distributed, we expect the wealth distribution of healthy societies to be close to a normal distribution (a diamond rather than a pyramid) as seen in Fig. 8. This is very reasonable to expect, because all of the factors of accumulating wealth, such as abilities, IQ, EQ, labor, education, chance, and inheritance are all normally distributed. Besides, in our everyday lives, we see too few super-rich and terribly-poor individuals just as we see few very low and very high IQ people, very strong and

very weak people etc. and too many working people, normal IQ, normal strength, education etc. around us compared to the better (upper side of the center of diamond) and worse (lower side of the center of diamond) of the ‘normal’.

#### A. *Relation Between social stratification and hierarchical needs*

Nevertheless, as the percentages suggested by Runciman (1990) show, the diamond, based on the real values – of Britain - would be too skewed to name it as a diamond, or normal distribution. This could be the evidence that one should not expect a non-normal distribution of wealth and income in socialist countries only. Market societies could have skewed-normal or non-normal distributions as well.

The normal curve may not be perfectly normal in real cases or may be completely non-normal as in socialist countries. Socialist countries with no real market would not provide an unskewed normal distribution because the upper side of the diamond –although argued to be not existing at all - would be pressed down in favor of the lower part of the diamond, or towards the left, negative side of the normal bell curve and should be providing a diamond that is more similar to a rectangle.

### iv. Conclusion

In this paper we presented the relations between the wealth distributions, social classes in the society and the hierarchical needs. Our statistical approach towards social classes and needs distributions shows that both social classes and the hierarchical need in a given society should be following a normal distribution curve, either positively, negatively skewed or unskewed because distributions of other kinds such as the ones that are attributed to Marx (1969) and Maslow (1954) do not represent the physical reality so long as their representation theoretically assume that one tail of the normal distribution does not exist. Pyramidal distributions are thus misleading because they disregard the fact that all human abilities, qualities, capabilities are normally distributed and societies do not fully (normal) or at least partially (skewed normal) a meritocracy.

This realization is a fundamental one in social sciences literature and must be causing many corrections to the earlier theories conflicting with this view but one of the foremost and obvious contribution would apparently be that the research community must realize that there are desperate people inside the group of people named as ‘poor’. Those people are living in such deprivation that they are eating our human values in our ‘modern’ times. We could help them for the sake of humanity only if we realize that they are invisible in modern theories because our theoretical approaches assume that they are identical to some people coded as ‘poor’ what would probably be a compliment for some of them at the very bottom of the symmetrical class hierarchy.

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