

**A THEORY OF  
HUMAN  
NEED**

**LEN DOYAL AND  
IAN GOUGH**

## **A Theory of Human Need**

By the same authors

Len Doyal (with Roger Harris), *Empiricism, Explanation  
and Rationality*

Ian Gough, *The Political Economy of the  
Welfare State*

# A Theory of Human Need

Len Doyal and Ian Gough

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MACMILLAN

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To Lesley Doyal and Margaret Jones

'The absurd is born of this confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world'.—**Albert Camus**

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## Preface

Talking in front of a coal fire in 1982, we discovered that we both had strong views about the existence of universal human needs and the inconsistencies of those who didn't. Although we come from different academic backgrounds – philosophy and political economy – we both believed that without a coherent theory of human need to back them up, many of the political causes to which we were committed made little sense. This belief was underlined by the political successes of the New Right in the early 1980s which fed upon the theoretical confusion of its opponents.

Our initial attempt at clarification was in an article with the same title as this book which was published in *Critical Social Policy* in 1984. Expanding these ideas has taken much longer than we and many others hoped and expected. This has been because of the enormity of the topic itself, the pressures of busy professional lives and the difficulties of academic collaboration over long distances. In some ways we regret the delay. For example, many of the changes which we argued in early drafts would have to come in the Eastern Bloc and Russia have actually occurred. Indeed, this change has occurred with such a vengeance that we have postponed plans for a second volume on the political economy of needs until the dust settles.

Yet the long gestation of our work has had two important advantages. First, we have been able to benefit from some fine research on human needs published since 1984 and have had time properly to contemplate the work of earlier writers. We have tried in all cases to give credit where credit is due but in a work of this size and complexity we may have left someone out. If so, we apologise in advance.

Second, the years have also led to the primary joy of our work – the evolution of our friendship and that of our families. A project of this duration is inevitably a burden for the partners. The simple fact is that our book could not have been completed without the labour and love of Lesley Doyal and Margaret Jones. Lesley edited two drafts of the entire book and made invaluable suggestions on



both substance and style. Margaret also provided consistent intellectual support. Both gave emotional and material help on many weekends of intense – and sometimes pretty obscure – discussion and writing. Most important of all, in constant dialogue and debate, they both kept us honest with ourselves and with the ideals which the four of us share. We dedicate it to them both with our love and thanks.

There are so many other colleagues and friends who have joined in our effort and who merit our public thanks that we hardly know where to begin. At Middlesex Polytechnic and Manchester University, Jonathan Powers and Paul Wilding have been staunch in their support, though they must often have doubted at times whether anything would result from it. It is no longer straightforward to write a book, let alone one as ludicrously ambitious as this, at a British institution of higher learning, but thanks to Jonathan, Paul and members of the School of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Middlesex and the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at Manchester, it has not proved impossible. Ian Gough is grateful, too, to the ESRC for the relief offered by a two-month personal research grant way back in the winter of 1984–5.

We are especially indebted to Roger Harris, Harry Lesser, Ian Miles, Raymond Plant, Jonathan Powers, David Purdy, Laurent van der Maesen and Grenville Wall, who read and commented on earlier drafts of the entire book, and to Meghnad Desai who did the same for the almost-final version. Warm thanks also to Paul Cammack, Roy Carr-Hill, Pat Devine, Diane Elson, Ian Forbes, Caroline Glendinning, Geoff Hodgson, Phil Leeson, Elena Lieven, Peter Osborne, Rosemary Pringle, Sophie Watson and Daniel Wilsher – all of whom have assiduously read and criticised various parts of the book. We have also benefited from the comments of no fewer than six anonymous readers commissioned by our publishers. It is safe to say that no one agreed with all of what they read. We learned a lot from their help, but of course bear sole responsibility for what remains.

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LEN DOYAL  
IAN GOUGH

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Figure 10.1 from G. W. Brown and T. Harris, *Social Origins of Depression*, Tavistock Publications, 1978, p. 46.

Figure 13.1 from Frances Stewart, *Planning to Meet Basic Needs*, Macmillan, 1985, p. 61, figure 4.2.

Table 12.2 from Howard Jones, *Social Welfare in Third World Development*, Macmillan, 1990, p. 110, table 5.3.

# Introduction

The idea of human need is widely used. Sometimes it is employed in attempts to justify social policies (e.g. 'The frail elderly need more sheltered housing') and to criticise them (e.g. 'British schooling does not meet the needs of its children'). So general is this use that it is hard to imagine how we could function without it. Are not decisions inevitable which prioritise some things and not others on the basis of need? Yet the idea of need has also been widely abused. On the grounds of their expertise about the satisfaction of human need, planners have justified and implemented disastrous social policies. Examples are unpopular public housing or the sometimes officious and meddling managers of welfare benefits. This abuse was most notable in the Eastern bloc system, labelled in a recent book 'a dictatorship over needs' (Feher *et al.*, 1983). Indeed, such perceived abuses have become so extensive that many have rejected the existence of common human needs, the satisfaction of which can be planned for in a uniform and successful way.

This rejection has gone hand in hand with a more general scepticism about the coherence of conceptions of rationality or reality which purport to be universal and objective. Stressing the impact of differences in language and culture on the way in which the world is theorised and perceived, such critics have either denied or minimised the importance of theories which contend that the needs of all humans are fundamentally the same. Economists, sociologists, philosophers, liberals, libertarians, Marxists, socialists, feminists, anti-racists and other social critics have increasingly regarded human need as a subjective and culturally relative concept, a credo which has contributed to the intellectual dominance of the New Right in the 1980s. For if the notion of objective need is

groundless, then what alternative is there but to believe that individuals know what is best for themselves and to encourage them to pursue their own subjective goals or preferences? And what better mechanism is there to achieve this than the market?

One thing is clear. A wide range of concepts concerning the evaluation of the human condition seems inextricably linked to the view that universal and objective human needs do exist. For example, it is difficult to see how political movements which espouse the improvement of human welfare can fail to endorse the following related beliefs:

1. Humans can be *seriously harmed* by alterable social circumstances, which can give rise to *profound suffering*.
2. Social *justice* exists in inverse proportion to serious harm and suffering.
3. When social change designed to minimise serious harm is accomplished in a sustained way then social *progress* can be said to have occurred.
4. When the minimisation of serious harm is not achieved then the resulting social circumstances are in conflict with the *objective interests* of those harmed.

Of course, the concept of serious harm is not the only place we could begin. Theory and practice which are critical of the political and moral status quo could equally well start with the more positive image of fundamental human *flourishing* and refer to the different sorts of social environments which encourage and sustain this process.

Either way, the most significant arguments supporting social *equality* focus on the extent to which humans have the same *potential* to be harmed or to flourish. Assuming that such potential exists, it is often argued that it is *unjust* and therefore wrong to favour one individual or group to the arbitrary disadvantage of any other. The history of socialist, reformist, anti-capitalist and anti-communist writing is, of course, full of both negative and positive images. The main point is that the theory and practice which they articulate are essentially *critical* and embody a range of *standards* with which morally to assess human affairs.

So the clarity of the preceding inter-related concepts presupposes that it *is* possible to identify objective and universal human goals which individuals must somehow achieve if they are to be able to optimise their life chances – that all humans have basic human needs in these terms. Similarly, when people express outrage at injustice, somewhere in the background is the belief that basic human needs exist which should have been satisfied but were not. It is the belief that the satisfaction of basic needs has normative *precedence* over the satisfaction of wants that generates condemnation when such needs are not satisfied. Generally speaking, we are morally more concerned when what we believe to be basic needs rather than wants go unsatisfied – free speech rather than free sweets. Yet without the concept of objective human need and the moral work of which it alone seems capable, this move from ‘is’ to ‘ought’ would not be possible.

We might therefore expect considerable agreement, at least among critics of the status quo, about what basic human needs are and how they should be satisfied. Yet as we have said, this is not the case. We are thus faced with the paradox that an idea which is still regularly used in the practice of social policy and in much political discourse is regularly rejected in the domain of theory. The result can only be confusion for providers of welfare and for those who are committed to the political struggle for the increased provision of welfare.

In order to correct this situation, we believe that a coherent, rigorous theory of human need must be developed to resurrect an acceptable vision of social progress and to provide a credible alternative to the neo-liberalism and political conservatism which have caused serious harm to so many within the capitalist world. However, such a theory must be informed by the mistakes – some terrible, some foolish – of welfare state paternalism, Stalinist collectivism and other political practices which have been premised on the existence of common needs. A credible and morally attractive theory of human need must draw upon both liberal and socialist thought. It will need to chart a third way forward which rejects both market individualism and state collectivism. We hope that this book will provide such a theory and will suggest how it should be applied in practice.

In general, we shall argue that basic human needs can be shown to exist, that individuals have a right to the optimal satisfaction of

these needs and that all human liberation should be measured by assessing the degree to which such satisfaction has occurred. Yet in extolling the plausibility and importance of the concept of basic human need, we will not forget how its use has sometimes caused serious harm. Any acceptable concept of need must be designed so that it cannot be used in authoritarian and paternalistic ways. Welfare states must somehow combine the individual right to need-satisfaction with the right to participate in deciding how such satisfaction is to occur in practice. It is for this reason that the problems of welfare provision and effective democracy are inextricably linked. A successful theory of human need must show why and how. In other words, in developing such a theory and demonstrating its use in practice, our approach will be both *substantive* and *procedural*.

Part I introduces the issue of individual and cultural relativity through examining and rejecting arguments that human needs are reducible to individual or collective preferences. In doing so, we explore the grammar of 'need' in ordinary discourse, illustrating its relationship to more general arguments about relativism.

Part II argues that 'health' and 'autonomy' constitute the most basic human needs which are the same for everyone. It is further argued that all humans have a right to optimum need-satisfaction. For this to occur, it will be shown that certain societal preconditions – political, economic and ecological – must be fulfilled.

The theory of need that emerges is then operationalised in Part III. The distinction between universal needs and culturally-relative satisfiers is clarified. Indicators of basic and 'intermediate' needs are identified and used to chart human welfare in the First, Second and Third Worlds.

Human needs, we argue, are neither subjective preferences best understood by each individual, nor static essences best understood by planners or party officials. They are universal and knowable, but our knowledge of them, and of the satisfiers necessary to meet them, is dynamic and open-ended. We conclude the book in Part IV by endorsing recent proposals for a mixed economy which also combines elements of both central planning and democratic decision-making – a 'dual strategy' for the optimisation of need satisfaction.

In exploring these ideas, we face a dilemma with regard to the significance of the individual in the politics of human need. When the moral importance of the needs of individuals is politically minimised, it is sometimes argued that the collective will benefit as a result – through, for example, a forced redistribution of wealth and income. Yet at the same time, if individual liberty and privacy are too much ignored in the name of the collective then we risk discarding what is valuable with what is not. Without understood and secure parameters of individual self expression and personal ownership, the *raison d'être* for redistribution – the maximum development of the individual as a person – becomes lost.

In articulating the theory of human need which follows we cannot be satisfied with just highlighting this tension; it will be necessary somehow to resolve it. In attempting to do so, we hope to add our voices to those who argue that the long-accepted antipathy between many of the classical principles of socialism and liberalism are illusory. As the continuing collapse of state socialism has revealed, without respect for the rights of the individual socialist principles become dangerous abstractions. Yet as the plight of the exploited and deprived throughout the Western world also shows, formal guarantees of political and economic freedom which ignore the material preconditions for their individual expression can undermine the principles of liberalism in a similar way.

# **I**

## **Relativism and the Problem of Human Need**

# 1

## Who Needs Human Needs?

Abuses of the concept of objective and universal human need have led to disillusionment and scepticism. This has contributed to the collapse of confidence in the prospect of successful socialist politics, the threat to welfare citizenship rights, the fragmentation of political struggle against varied forms of oppression, and, gaining strength from all of this, the intellectual influence of the New Right. Many argue that it is morally safer and intellectually more coherent to equate needs with subjective preferences – that only individuals or selected groups of individuals can decide the goals to which they are going to attach enough priority to deem them needs. The aim of this book – the demonstration that we all have the same needs – is obviously inconsistent with such relativism. Therefore, we must begin by exploring some of its more representative forms.

### **Orthodox economics: needs are preferences**

For the orthodox economist, the 'objectivity' of need is suspect. Against the background of disagreement among consumers and producers about who needs what, 'preferences' and 'demand' are regarded as sufficient for the purposes of much positive and normative economic theory. So just because a majority might rank their preference for food higher than, say, that for fashion does not mean that a clothes-conscious minority might not legitimately make the opposite choice. Such choices have the same ontological and moral status – they are consumer demands which either can or cannot be acted upon through the expenditure of income. The idea

of need signifies no more than a preference shared by many people which they persuade the government requires special attention. 'Social needs are demands which have been defined by society as sufficiently important to qualify for social recognition as goods or services which should be met by government intervention' (Nevitt, 1977, p. 115; cf. Williams, 1974).

Orthodox welfare economics thus enunciates two fundamental principles. The first is the subjective conception of interests: the premise that individuals (or, frequently, households) are the only authorities on the correctness of their interests, or more narrowly, their wants. Following from this, the second is the principle of private sovereignty: that what is to be produced, how it is to be produced, and how it is to be distributed should be determined by the private consumption and work preferences of individuals (Penz, 1986, pp. 55; cf. p. 40). While numerous criticisms have been made of both principles over the last century, they still form the normative basis for the inattention paid to the concept of need by neo-classical economics.

A variety of approaches have been adopted to translate the first principle into an operational method of evaluating well-being. Early theories relied on utilitarian thinking and the contribution of objects to an assumed equal capacity for subjective pleasure or happiness'. Later this was modified to assess desire-fulfilment as indicated by choice expressed in market situations. From here it is but a short step to the direct equation of well-being with opulence or the real income of people as measured by the vector of commodities they consume (Sen, 1985, ch. 3; 1987, pp. 5–17). In this way it is claimed that subjective want satisfaction can be measured scientifically and thus be used to evaluate states of affairs or policies. Despite the differences between these approaches they all have in common the implicit rejection of an objective and universal notion of need.

### **The New Right: needs are dangerous**

Related to this implicit equation of needs with preferences is the argument of recent conservative political theorists that once it is accepted that some have a right to legislate for others about what they need then the slippery slope to authoritarianism does seem

more likely. If the voice of the people is regarded by government as damaged goods to begin with – blemished either by ignorance or self-interest – then it is hardly surprising that abuses of power and intrusions into individual liberty will follow. These can range from the relatively minor, like small increases in taxation for purposes which have not been democratically approved, to the major, like substantial restrictions on political freedoms in the name of meeting the real needs of the the public (Flew, 1977, pp. 213–28; cf. McInnes, 1977, pp. 229–43). Writers of the New Right all argue that it is the market rather than extensive state welfare to which we should turn to avoid these problems, maintaining that it is a *morally* superior as well as a more efficient method of allocating resources and defining goals (Green, 1987, Part I).

A major consequence of accepting this argument is that there is no basis for collective agreement on principles of justice, no consensual norms which would allow us to identify one pattern of the distribution of wealth, say, as the correct one. Conservative theorists like Hayek and Nozick argue, for example, that at the end of the day welfare must take the form of charity if it is to be morally justified. Individuals must, more or less or in toto, be left to choose what they need and what they should spend on what they perceive others as needing. Gray, another representative of the New Right, underlines this argument: 'The objectivity of basic needs is equally delusive. Needs can be given no plausible cross-cultural content but instead are seen to vary across different moral traditions... One of the chief functions of the contemporary ideology of social justice may be, as Hayek intimates, to generate an illusion of moral agreement, where in fact there are profound divergencies of values' (Gray, 1983, p. 182). In other words, basic human needs are nothing but a dangerous and dogmatic metaphysical fantasy.

To the extent that the preferences of the well-off are seen as carrying with them the same moral legitimacy as those of the poor, then this will reinforce a social system which encourages individual capital accumulation. For the utilitarians of the Right, it is the wealth and consumer power of the majority which has moral priority. For libertarian followers of Nozick, moral power translates into the right of individuals to dispose of their property in any way they like, even if this leads to widespread poverty and suffering. However, for both, what humans do and do not need is something that can only be determined by themselves.

**Marxism: needs are historical**

It is not surprising that those who support an unbridled capitalism should endorse such views. What is more surprising is that some socialists could embrace the cultural relativism which follows from them. To explore this paradox, we must begin with Marx. On the one hand, there seems no question but that he believed in the existence of objective human needs. Marx railed eloquently about the costs to working people of providing the labour power for the development of capitalism via the industrial revolution: 'oppression', 'degradation of personal dignity', 'accumulation of misery', 'physical and mental degradation', 'shameless direct and brutal exploitation', 'modern slavery', 'subjugation', the 'horrors', 'torture' and 'brutality' of overwork, the 'murderous' search for economy in the production process, capital's 'laying waste and squandering' labour power, 'exacting ceaseless human sacrifices' (Lukes, 1985, p. 11). The same can be said of those who further laid the foundations of revolutionary Marxism in the twentieth century. Ostensibly, such denunciations of capitalism cut little moral ice without the belief that there are some requirements which all humans have in common and which lead to unacceptable levels of individual impairment when they are not met.

Yet on the other hand, Marx was equally convinced that attempts to limit human nature to the dictates of either biology or culture were both misconceived and politically dangerous. Anticipating a range of contemporary philosophical and sociological approaches to the same question, he argued that the formation of individuality was inexorably linked to language and to the way in which we learn a wide range of normative rules and mental and manual skills (Doyal and Harris, 1986, pp. 80–8; Elster, 1985, pp. 62–4). It is from the social application of these that self-consciousness and individual identity evolve. For Marx, the economic aspects of the social environment were by far the most important in shaping human identity. If such conditions differ, then so will the individual conception of self – what is natural or unnatural, possible or impossible, harmful or beneficial, good or bad, normal or abnormal. This will mean that individual perceptions of need will also differ in the most profound ways for the same reasons.

The attractiveness of such a position for Marx and all socialists is understandable. To fix the boundaries of human nature biologically

or anthropologically seems unnecessarily to freeze human consciousness at particular points of time and culture. In other words, if human needs are reified – imbued with a thing-like, static or physical quality – then individuals are arbitrarily constrained in changing those aspects of their physical, personal and social environment which inhibit their self-exploration. Prioritising alterations in the 'economic base' of society as the central dynamic of such change opens the way to radical changes in the superstructure of the entire spectrum of human expectation and imagination, especially in what humans believe that they need and have a right to demand. Marx thought that the social relations of capitalism are uniquely constituted to lead to a veritable explosion in human productivity and material expectation, bringing in their train a 'constantly enriched system of needs'.<sup>2</sup> These new needs are not only testimony to the creativity of the human spirit. In the midst of large-scale poverty and exploitation, they also sow the seeds of revolt through underlining *what might be* – the prospect of abundance and the injustice of a social system where the needs of those who produce the wealth remain unmet.

Heller has taken this scepticism about universal human needs to its logical extreme. She argues that precisely because of the holistic impact of society on human consciousness and on the formulation of what is and is not a basic need, it is impossible to compare cultures with respect to their progress in maximising need-satisfaction: 'The structure of needs in capitalist society belongs therefore exclusively to capitalist society. It cannot be used to judge any other society in general and least of all that of the "associated producers"' (Heller, 1976, pp. 96–7; cf. Springborg, 1981, pp. 198–213). In short, human needs are socially relative and stipulate only what some groups of humans prefer over others. Attempts by those in one culture or social formation to impose their conception of basic needs onto any other is no more than cultural imperialism – the pursuit of specific group interests.

**Critiques of cultural imperialism: needs are group specific**

This concern about cultural imperialism is both understandable and widespread in a variety of forms. Its popularity reflects an acute sensitivity to the fact that those in positions of power can always



legitimate its arbitrary exercise through arguing that they know what is in the best interests of the powerless. That is to say, the preferences of the dominated are downgraded as inferior to their 'real' needs as defined by those in authority. Indeed, such arguments have constituted one of the ideological means by which capitalism has frequently ravaged the traditional societies which it has economically and culturally colonised. Colonialists have legitimated their economic domination through encouraging a sense of inferiority and helplessness in the face of Western 'progress'. The rejection of the concept of universal needs is also part of the background to more contemporary struggles against oppression. Here, human liberation is equated with reclaiming the right of oppressed groups to determine what preferences *they* will designate as needs. Against this background, it is sometimes argued, the concept of *universal* needs inevitably favours the dictatorial oppressor (Rist, 1980, pp. 233–53).

The argument shifts from an equation of need with the sovereign preferences of the individual to an acceptance that objective needs exist but of a sort which can only be determined by specific oppressed *groups*. Truth claims are made about human need but truth is perceived as varying from group to group. It is but a short step to identify group preferences with group need. What on the face of it appears as an endorsement of the objective need of specific groups collapses into subjectivism of a collective rather than individual variety. This collapse can be illustrated by three further examples of the politics of need: versions of radical anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-scientism.

Beginning with anti-racism, the basic message is clear. Black people from many different backgrounds are discriminated against in a host of well-documented ways. The classic examples of racism are well known and do not require further description here. Yet in abhorring all of these manifestations of racism, some contemporary writers – both black and white – go much further and appear to reject any common foundation of human need between all races and nationalities. This is suggested by Shah when she writes: 'Whenever white people... have attempted assessments of black people they have come out with a distorted analysis. Because black people's ways are different, and white people cannot be bothered to work at a proper understanding, black experience is distorted and dismissed' (Shah, 1989, p. 183; cf. Smith and Smith, 1983, p. 113).

The blanket of inescapable cultural/biological determination does not just affect those who we all knew were racists by their overt actions. It contaminates all whites – even those who might ostensibly seem to be allies. For example, many feminists criticise some cultural practices such as arranged marriages, purdah and female circumcision as oppressive and objectively harmful to the black women involved. Such arguments have been attacked by some radical anti-racists, however, as ethnocentric and damaging to the dignity of both the black women and the black men whose life styles are seen to be under attack. Implicitly or explicitly, it is said to be the 'whiteness' of these critics which lies behind their adoption of such prejudiced views and the basic needs to which they implicitly refer are really no more than their own cultural preferences. Such arguments suggest but one conclusion: only blacks can ever know what they need in a white-dominated world.<sup>3</sup>

With some 'radical feminist' arguments against sexism, we have a similar picture. There is no doubt that throughout history and in a variety of cultures, women have been exploited and abused by men. In struggling against all of these inequities, some feminists have argued that men are naturally aggressive and prone to violence, domination and exploitation. Such tendencies are explained in different ways depending on the theorist. Contenders for primary causation are biology and the patriarchal cultures within which male consciousness is formed. This combination of cultural determination and psycho/socio-biology is said to account for what is regarded as the universality of patriarchy and the apparent inability of men to behave otherwise.

Dworkin (1980, p. 288) takes this to its logical extreme in arguing that: 'One can know everything and still at bottom, refuse to accept that the annihilation of women is the source of meaning and identity for men'. Daly (1984, p. 363) is equally pessimistic in claiming that in the 'phallocracy' in which men and women live, the former are 'radically separated from the natural harmony of the universe' and motivated by 'the dynamics of demonic possession'. The argument has even been carried so far as to suggest that there is a female 'rationality' and a 'feminist methodology' which must be used instead of traditional approaches to scientific inquiry which are also contaminated by their patriarchal background. Stanley and Wise (1983, p. 117) maintain, for example, that 'women's experiences constitute a different view of reality, an entirely different