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Talking about Needs: Interpretive Contests as Political Conflicts in Welfare-State Societies*

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> Need is also a political instrument, meticulously prepared, calculated and used. [MICHEL FOUCAULT][1]

In late-capitalist, welfare-state societies, talk about people's needs is an important species of political discourse. We argue, in the United States, for example, about whether the government ought to provide for health and day-care needs, and indeed, about whether such needs exist. And we dispute whether existing social-welfare programs really do meet the needs they purport to satisfy or whether, instead, they misconstrue those needs. We also argue about what exactly various groups of people really do need and about who should have the last word in such matters. In all these cases, needs-talk functions as a medium for the making and contesting of political claims. It is an idiom in which political conflict is played out and through which inequalities are symbolically elaborated and challenged.

Talk about needs has not always been central to Western political culture; it has often been considered antithetical to politics and relegated to the margins of political life. However, in welfare-state societies, needs-talk has been institutionalized as a major vocabulary of political discourse.[2]

1. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 26.
2. In this article, I shall use the terms 'welfare-state societies' and 'late-capitalist societies' interchangeably to refer to the industrialized countries of Western Europe and North America in the present period. Of course, the process of welfare-state formation begins at different times, proceeds at different rates, and takes different forms in these countries. Still, I assume that it is possible in principle to identify and characterize some features of these societies which transcend such differences. On the other hand, most of the examples

It coexists, albeit often uneasily, with talk about rights and interests at the very center of political life. Indeed, this peculiar juxtaposition of a discourse about needs with discourses about rights and interests is one of the distinctive marks of late-capitalist political culture.

Why has needs-talk become so prominent in the political culture of welfare-state societies? What is the relation between this development and changes in late-capitalist social structure? What does the emergence of the needs idiom imply about shifts in the boundaries between "political," "economic," and "domestic" spheres of life? Does it betoken an extension of the political sphere or, rather, a colonization of that domain by newer modes of power and social control? What are the major varieties of needs-talk and how do they interact polemically with one another? What opportunities and/or obstacles does the needs idiom pose for movements interested in social transformation?

In what follows, I outline an approach for thinking about such questions rather than proposing definitive answers to them. What I have to say falls into four parts. In Section I, I suggest a break with standard theoretical approaches by shifting the focus of inquiry from needs to discourses about needs, from the distribution of need satisfactions to the "politics of need interpretation." I propose a model of social discourse designed to bring into relief the contested character of needs-talk in welfare-state societies. Then, in Section II, I relate this discourse model to social-structural considerations, especially to shifts in the boundaries between "political," "economic," and "domestic" or "personal" spheres of life in late-capitalist societies. Then, in Section III, I identify three major strands of needs-talk in contemporary political culture and I map some of the ways in which they compete for potential adherents. Finally, in Section IV, I apply the model to some concrete cases of contemporary needs politics in the United States.

I

Let me begin by explaining some of the peculiarities of the approach I am trying to develop. In my approach, the focus of inquiry is not needs but rather *discourses* about needs. The point is to shift our angle of vision on the politics of needs. Usually, the politics of needs is understood to concern the distribution of satisfactions. In my approach, by contrast, the focus is the *politics of need interpretation*.

The reason for focusing on discourses and interpretation is to bring into view the contextual and contested character of needs claims. As many theorists have noted, needs claims have a relational structure; implicitly or explicitly, they have the form 'A needs x in order to y.' Now, this structure poses no problems when we are considering very general or "thin" needs such as food or shelter *simpliciter*. Thus, we can uncon-

invoked here are from the U.S. context, and it is possible that this skews the account. Further comparative work would be needed to determine the precise scope of applicability of the model presented here.

troversially say that homeless people, like everyone else in nontropical climates, need shelter in order to live. And most people will infer that governments, as guarantors of life and liberty, have a responsibility to provide for this need. However, as soon as we descend to a lesser level of generality, needs claims become far more controversial. What, more "thickly," do homeless people need in order to be sheltered from the cold? What specific forms of provision are implied once we acknowledge their very general, thin need? Do homeless people need forbearance to sleep undisturbed next to a hot air vent on a street corner? A space in a subway tunnel or a bus terminal? A bed in a temporary shelter? A permanent home? Suppose we say the latter. What kind of permanent housing do homeless people need? Rental units in high-rises in center city areas remote from good schools, discount shopping, and job opportunities? Single-family homes designed for single-earner, two-parent families? And what else do homeless people need in order to have permanent homes? Rent subsidies? Income supports? Jobs? Job training and education? Day care? Finally, what is needed, at the level of housing policy, in order to insure an adequate stock of affordable housing? Tax incentives to encourage private investment in low-income housing? Concentrated or scattered site public housing projects within a generally commodified housing environment? Rent control? Decommodification of urban housing?

We could continue proliferating such questions indefinitely. And we would, at the same time, be proliferating controversy. That is precisely the point about needs claims. These claims tend to be nested, connected to one another in ramified chains of "in-order-to" relations. Moreover, when these chains are unraveled in the course of political disputes, disagreements usually deepen rather than abate. Precisely how such chains are unraveled depends on what the interlocutors share in the way of background assumptions. Does it go without saying that policy designed to deal with homelessness must not challenge the basic ownership and investment structure of urban real estate? Or is that a point of rupture in the network of in-order-to relations, a point at which people's assumptions and commitments diverge?

It is this network of deeply contested in-order-to relations that I mean to call attention to when I propose to focus on the politics of need interpretation. I believe that thin theories of needs which do not descend into the murky depths of such networks are unable to shed much light on contemporary needs politics. Such theories assume that the politics of needs concerns only whether various predefined needs will or will not be provided for. As a result, they deflect attention from a number of important political questions.[3] First, they take the *interpretation* of people's

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3. A recent example of the kind of theory I have in mind is David Braybrooke, *Meeting Needs* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987). Braybrooke claims that a thin concept of need "can make a substantial contribution to settling upon policies without having to descend into the melee" (p. 68). Thus, he does not take up any of the issues I am about to enumerate.

needs as simply given and unproblematic; they thus occlude the interpretive dimension of needs politics—the fact that not just satisfactions but *need interpretations* are politically contested. Second, they assume that it is unproblematic who interprets the needs in question and from what perspective and in the light of what interests; they thus occlude the fact that *who* gets to establish authoritative, thick definitions of people's needs is itself a political stake. Third, they take for granted that the socially authorized forms of public discourse available for interpreting people's needs are adequate and fair; they thus occlude the question whether these forms of public discourse are skewed in favor of the self-interpretations and interests of dominant social groups and, so, work to the disadvantage of subordinate or oppositional groups; they occlude, in other words, the fact that the means of public discourse themselves may be at issue in needs politics.[4] Fourth, such theories fail to focalize the social and institutional logic of processes of need interpretation; they thus occlude such important political questions as where in society, in what institutions, are authoritative need interpretations developed, and what sorts of social relations are in force among the interlocutors or co-interpreters?

In order to remedy these blindspots, I am trying to develop a more politically critical, discourse-oriented alternative. As I said, my approach shifts the focus of inquiry from needs to discourses about needs. Moreover, I take the politics of needs to comprise three analytically distinct but practically interrelated moments. The first is the struggle to establish or deny the political status of a given need, that is, the struggle to validate the need as a matter of legitimate political concern or to enclave it as a nonpolitical matter. The second is the struggle over the interpretation of the need, the struggle for the power to define it and, so, to determine what would satisfy it. The third moment is the struggle over the satisfaction of the need, that is, the struggle to secure or withhold provision.

Now, a focus on the politics of need interpretation requires a model of social discourse. The model I have developed foregrounds the multivalent and contested character of needs-talk, the fact that in welfare-state societies we encounter a plurality of competing ways of talking about people's needs. The model theorizes what I call "the sociocultural means of interpretation and communication." By sociocultural means of interpretation and communication (MIC), I mean the historically and culturally specific ensemble of discursive resources available to members of a given social collectivity in pressing claims against one another. Included among these resources are things like the following.

1. The officially recognized idioms in which one can press claims; for example, needs-talk, rights-talk, and interests-talk.

2. The vocabularies available for instantiating claims in these recognized idioms; thus, with respect to needs-talk, what are the vocabularies

4. For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Nancy Fraser, "Toward a Discourse Ethic of Solidarity," *Praxis International* 5 (1986): 425–29.

available for interpreting and communicating one's needs? For example, therapeutic vocabularies, administrative vocabularies, religious vocabularies, feminist vocabularies, and socialist vocabularies.

3. The paradigms of argumentation accepted as authoritative in adjudicating conflicting claims; thus, with respect to needs-talk, how are conflicts over the interpretation of needs resolved? By appeals to scientific experts, by brokered compromises, by voting according to majority rule, by privileging the interpretations of those whose needs are in question?

4. The narrative conventions available for constructing the individual and collective stories which are constitutive of people's social identities.

5. Modes of subjectification; the ways in which various discourses position the people to whom they are addressed as specific sorts of subjects endowed with specific sorts of capacities for action; for example, as "normal" or "deviant," as causally conditioned or freely self-determining, as victims or as potential activists, and as unique individuals or as members of social groups.[5]

Now, in welfare-state societies, there are a plurality of forms of association, roles, groups, institutions, and discourses. Thus, the means of interpretation and communication are not all of a piece. They do not constitute a coherent, monolithic web but rather a heterogeneous, polyglot field of diverse possibilities and alternatives.

In fact, in welfare-state societies, discourses about needs typically make at least implicit reference to alternative interpretations. Particular claims about needs are "internally dialogized"; implicitly or explicitly they evoke resonances of competing need interpretations. They therefore allude to a conflict of need interpretations.[6]

5. The expression 'mode of subjectification' is inspired by Foucault, although his term is 'mode of subjection' and his usage differs somewhat from mine. Compare Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *The Foucault Reader,* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 340–73. For another account of this idea of the sociocultural means of interpretation and communication, see Fraser, "Toward a Discourse Ethic of Solidarity."

6. The expression 'internally dialogized' comes from Mikhail Bakhtin. By invoking it here, I mean to suggest that the Bakhtinian notion of a "dialogic heteroglossia" (or a cross-referential, multivoiced field of significations) is more apt as a description of the MIC in complex societies than is the more monolithic Lacanian idea of The Symbolic or the Saussurean idea of a seamless code. However, in claiming that the Bakhtinian conceptions of heteroglossia and dialogization are especially apt with respect to complex, differentiated societies, including late-capitalist, welfare-state societies, I am intentionally breaking with Bakhtin's own view. He assumed, on the contrary, that these conceptions found their most robust expression in the "carnivalesque" culture of late medieval Europe and that the subsequent history of Western societies brought a flattening out of language and a restriction of dialogic heteroglossia to the specialized, esoteric domain of "the literary." This seems patently false—especially when we recognize that the dialogic, polemical character of speech is related to the availability in a culture of a plurality of competing discourses and of subject-positions from which to articulate them. Thus, conceptually, one would expect what, I take it, is in fact the case: that speech in complex, differentiated societies would be especially suitable for analysis in terms of these Bakhtinian categories. For the Bakhtinian conceptions of heteroglossia and internal dialogization, see "Discourse in the Novel," in

On the other hand, welfare-state societies are not simply pluralist. Rather, they are stratified, differentiated into social groups with unequal status, power, and access to resources, and traversed by pervasive axes of inequality along lines of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and age. The MIC in these societies are also stratified, that is, organized in ways which are congruent with societal patterns of dominance and subordination.

It follows that we must distinguish those elements of the MIC which are hegemonic, authorized, and officially sanctioned, on the one hand, from those which are nonhegemonic, disqualified, and discounted, on the other hand. Some ways of talking about needs are institutionalized in the central discursive arenas of late-capitalist societies: parliaments, academies, courts, and mass circulation media. Other ways of talking about needs are enclaved as subcultural sociolects and are normally excluded from the central discursive arenas.[7] For example, moralistic and scientific discourses about the needs of people with AIDS, and of people at risk with respect to AIDS, are represented on government commissions; in contrast, gay and lesbian rights activists' interpretations of those needs are excluded.

From this perspective, needs-talk appears as a site of struggle where groups with unequal discursive (and nondiscursive) resources compete to establish as hegemonic their respective interpretations of legitimate social needs. Dominant groups articulate need interpretations intended to exclude, defuse, and/or co-opt counterinterpretations. Subordinate or oppositional groups, on the other hand, articulate need interpretations intended to challenge, displace, and/or modify dominant ones. In both cases, the interpretations are acts and interventions.[8]

II

Now I should like to try to situate the discourse model I have just sketched with respect to some social-structural features of late-capitalist societies. Here, I seek to relate the rise of politicized needs-talk to shifts in the

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The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259–422. For a helpful secondary account, see Dominick LaCapra, "Bakhtin, Marxism and the Carnivalesque," in his *Rethinking Intellectual History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 294–324. For a critique of the Romantic, antimodernist bias in both Bakhtin and LaCapra, see Nancy Fraser, "On the Political and the Symbolic: Against the Metaphysics of Textuality," *Enclitic* 9 (1987): 100–114.

7. If the previous point was Bakhtinian, this one could be considered Bourdieuian. There is probably no contemporary social theorist who has worked more fruitfully than Bourdieu at understanding cultural contestation in relation to societal inequality. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice,* trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), and also *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Pure Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

8. Here the model aims to marry Bakhtin with Bourdieu. For the use of (what looks to me like) a similar theoretical perspective in a different context, see T. J. Clarke, "Beliefs and Purposes in David's *Death of Marat,*" seminar 2 (typescript).

boundaries separating "political," "economic," and "domestic" dimensions of life. However, unlike many social theorists, I shall treat the terms 'political,' 'economic,' and 'domestic' as cultural classifications and ideological labels rather than as designations of structures, spheres, or things.[9]

Let me begin by noting that the terms 'politics' and 'political' are highly contested, and they have a number of different senses.[10] In the present context, the two most important senses are the following. First, there is the institutional sense in which a matter is deemed "political" if it is handled directly in the institutions of the official governmental system, including parliaments, administrative apparatuses, and the like. In this sense, what is "political"—call it "official-political"—contrasts with what is handled in institutions like the "family" and the "economy," which are defined as being outside the official-political system, even though they are in actuality underpinned and regulated by it. Second, there is the discourse sense in which something is "political" if it is contested across a range of different discursive arenas and among a range of different publics. In this sense, what is "political"—call it 'discursive-political' or 'politic*ized*'—contrasts both with what is not contested in public at all and also with what is contested only by and within relatively specialized, enclaved, and/or segmented publics.[11] These two senses are not unrelated. In democratic theory, if not always in practice, a matter does not usually become subject to legitimate state intervention until it has been debated across a wide range of discourse publics.

9. I owe this formulation to Paul Mattick. For a thoughtful discussion of the advantages of this sort of approach, see his "On *Feminism as Critique*" (typescript).

10. Included among the senses I shall not discuss are (1) the pejorative colloquial sense according to which a decision is "political" when personal jockeying for power overrides germane substantive considerations; and (2) the radical political-theoretical sense according to which all interactions traversed by relations of power and inequality are 'political.'

11. Let me spell out some of the presuppositions and implications of the discourse sense of 'politics.' This sense stipulates that a matter is 'political' if it is contested across a range of different discursive arenas and among a range of different discourse publics. Thus, it depends on the idea of discursive publicity. However, in this conception, publicity is not understood in a simple unitary way as the undifferentiated opposite of discursive privacy. Rather, publicity is understood differentiatedly, on the assumption that it is possible to identify a plurality of distinct discourse publics and to theorize the relations among them. Clearly, publics can be distinguished along a number of different axes, e.g., by ideology (the readership of *The Nation* versus the readership of *The Public Interest*), by stratification principles like gender (the viewers of "Cagney and Lacey" versus the viewers of "Monday Night Football") and class (the readership of the *New York Times* versus that of the *New York Post*), by profession (the membership of the American Economic Association versus that of the American Bar Association), by central mobilizing issue (the Nuclear Freeze movement versus the 'Pro-Life' movement). Publics can also be distinguished in terms of relative power. Some are large, authoritative, and able to set the terms of debate for many of the rest. Others, by contrast, are small, self-enclosed, and enclaved, unable to make much of a mark beyond their own borders. Publics of the former sort are often able to take the lead in the formation of hegemonic blocs: concatenations of different publics which together construct "the common sense" of the day. As a result, such leading publics usually have a heavy hand in defining what is "political" in the discourse sense. They can

There do not seem to be any a priori constraints dictating that some matters simply are intrinsically political and others simply are intrinsically not. As a matter of fact, these boundaries are drawn differently from culture to culture and from historical period to historical period. For example, health and reproduction were cast as political matters in late nineteenth-century France in a context of nationalist and racist concern for "the declining birth rate." Throughout much of the twentieth century in the United States, in contrast, health and reproduction have been considered to be outside the domain of politics.[12]

On the other hand, it would be misleading to suggest that, for any society in any period, the boundary between what is political and what is not is simply fixed or given. On the contrary, this boundary may itself be an object of conflict. For example, struggles over Poor Law "reform" in nineteenth-century England were also conflicts about the scope of the political. And as I shall argue shortly, one of the primary stakes of social conflict in late-capitalist societies is precisely where the limits of the political will be drawn.

Now, how should we conceptualize the politicization of needs in late-capitalist societies? Clearly, this involves processes whereby some matters break out of zones of discursive privacy and out of specialized or enclaved publics so as to become foci of generalized contestation. When this happens, previously taken for granted interpretations of these matters are called into question, and heretofore reified chains of in-order-to relations become subject to dispute.

What are the zones of privacy and the specialized publics which previously enveloped newly politicized needs in late-capitalist societies? What are the institutions in which these needs were enclaved and de-politicized, where their interpretations were reified by being embedded in taken for granted networks of in-order-to relations?

In male-dominated, capitalist societies, what is "political" is normally defined contrastively over against what is "economic" and "domestic" or "personal." Thus, we can identify two principal sets of institutions here which depoliticize social discourses. They are, first, domestic institutions, especially the normative domestic form, namely, the modern, restricted, male-headed, nuclear family; and, second, official-economic capitalist system institutions, especially paid workplaces, markets, credit mechanisms,

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politicize an issue simply by entertaining contestation concerning it, since such contestation will be transmitted as a matter of course to and through other allied and opposing publics. Smaller, counterhegemonic publics, by contrast, generally lack the power to politicize issues in this way. When they succeed in fomenting widespread contestation over what was previously "nonpolitical," it is usually by far slower and more laborious means.

12. For France, see Karen Offen, "Minotaur or Mother? The Gendering of the State in Early Third Republic France" (typescript). For the United States, see Susan Reverby, "The Body and the Body Politic: Towards a History of Women and Health Care" (typescript); and Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right* (New York: Viking, 1976).

and "private" enterprises and corporations.[13] Domestic institutions de-
politicize certain matters by personalizing and/or familializing them; they
cast these as private-domestic or personal-familial matters in contradis-
tinction to public, political matters. Official-economic capitalist system
institutions, on the other hand, depoliticize certain matters by economizing
them; the issues in question here are cast as impersonal market imperatives
or as "private" ownership prerogatives or as technical problems for man-
agers and planners, all in contradistinction to political matters. In both
cases, the result is a foreshortening of chains of in-order-to relations for
interpreting people's needs; interpretive chains are truncated and pre-
vented from spilling across the boundaries separating the "domestic" and
the "economic" from the "political."

Clearly, domestic and official-economic system institutions differ in
many important respects. However, in *these* respects they are exactly on
a par with one another: both enclave certain matters into specialized
discursive arenas; both thereby shield such matters from generalized
contestation and from widely disseminated conflicts of interpretation;
and, as a result, both entrench as authoritative certain specific interpre-
tations of needs by embedding them in certain specific, but largely un-
questioned, chains of in-order-to relations.

Moreover, since both domestic and official-economic system institutions
support relations of dominance and subordination, the specific inter-
pretations they naturalize usually tend, on the whole, to advantage dom-
inant groups and individuals and to disadvantage their subordinates. If
wife-battering, for example, is enclaved as a "personal" or "domestic"
matter within male-headed, restricted families, and if public discourse
about this phenomenon is canalized into specialized publics associated
with, say, family law, social work, and the sociology and psychology of
"deviance," then this serves to reproduce gender dominance and sub-
ordination. Similarly, if questions of workplace democracy are enclaved
as "economic" or "managerial" problems in profit-oriented, hierarchically
managed paid workplaces, and if discourse about these questions is shunted
into specialized publics associated with, say, "industrial relations" sociology,
labor law, and "management science," then this serves to perpetuate class
(and usually also gender and race) dominance and subordination.

Moreover, members of subordinated groups commonly internalize
need interpretations that work to their own disadvantage. They are subject
to pressures to scale back their aspirations and adapt their beliefs so that
they can participate with reduced "cognitive and affective dissonance"
in culturally sanctioned institutions and practices. However, sometimes

13. Throughout this paper, I refer to paid workplaces, markets, credit systems, etc.
as "*official*-economic system institutions" so as to avoid the androcentric implication that
domestic institutions are not also "economic." For a discussion of this issue, see Nancy
Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," *New
German Critique* 35 (1985): 97–131.

culturally dominant need interpretations are superimposed upon latent or embryonic oppositional interpretations. This is most likely where there persist, however fragmentedly, subculturally transmitted traditions of resistance, as in some sections of the U.S. labor movement and in the collective historical memory of many African-Americans. Under special circumstances, which are hard to specify theoretically, processes of de-politicization are disrupted. Then, dominant classifications of needs as "economic" or "domestic," as opposed to "political," come to lose their "self-evidence" and alternative, oppositional, and *politicized* interpretations emerge in their stead.[14]

In any case, family and official economy are the principal depoliticizing enclaves which needs must exceed in order to become "political" in the discourse sense in male-dominated, capitalist societies. Thus, the emergence of needs-talk as a political idiom in these societies is the other side of the increased permeability of domestic and official-economic institutions, that is, their growing inability fully to depoliticize certain matters. The politicized needs at issue in late-capitalist societies, then, are "leaky" or "runaway" needs: they are needs which have broken out of the discursive enclaves constructed in and around domestic and official-economic in-stitutions.

Runaway needs are a species of excess with respect to the normative modern domestic and economic institutions. Initially at least, they bear the stamp of those institutions, remaining embedded in conventional chains of in-order-to relations. For example, many runaway needs are colored by the assumption that the "domestic" is supposed to be separated from the "economic" in male-dominated, capitalist societies. Thus, throughout most of U.S. history, child care has been cast as a "domestic" rather than an "economic" need; it has been interpreted as the need of children for the full-time care of their mothers rather than as the need of workers for time away from their children; and its satisfaction has been construed along the lines of "mothers' pensions" rather than of day care.[15] Here, the assumption of "separate spheres" truncates possible

14. The difficulty in specifying theoretically the conditions under which processes of depoliticization are disrupted stems from the difficulty of relating what are usually, and doubtless misleadingly, considered "economic" and "cultural" "factors." Thus, rational choice models seem to me to err in overweighting "economic" at the expense of "cultural" determinants, as in the (not always accurate) prediction that culturally dominant but ultimately disadvantageous need interpretations lose their hold when economic prosperity heralds reduced inequality and promotes "rising expectations." See Jon Elster, "Sour Grapes," in *Utilitarianism and Beyond,* ed. Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). An alternative model developed by Jane Jenson emphasizes the cultural-ideological lens through which "economic" effects are filtered. Jenson relates "crises in the mode of regulation" to shifts in cultural "paradigms" that cast into relief previously present but nonemphasized elements of people's social identities. See her "Re-Writing History: Lessons for Feminist Theory" (typescript).

15. See Sonya Michel, "American Women and the Discourse of the Democratic Family in World War II," in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars,* ed. Margaret Higonnet, Jane Jenson, and Sonya Michel (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), and

chains of in-order-to relations which would yield alternative interpretations of social needs.

Now, where do runaway needs run to when they break out of domestic or official-economic enclaves? I propose that runaway needs enter a historically specific and relatively new societal arena. Following Hannah Arendt, I call this arena the "social" in order to mark its noncoincidence with the family, official economy, and the state.[16] As the site where runaway needs "run to," the "social" cuts across these traditional divisions. It is a site of contested discourse about runaway needs, an arena of conflict among rival interpretations of needs embedded in rival chains of in-order-to relations.[17]

As I conceive it, the social is a switch point for the meeting of heterogeneous contestants associated with a wide range of different discourse publics. These contestants range from proponents of politicization to defenders of (re)depoliticization, from loosely organized social movements to members of specialized, expert publics in and around the social state. Moreover, they vary greatly in relative power. Some are associated with leading publics capable of setting the terms of political debate; others, by contrast, are linked to enclaved publics and must oscillate between marginalization and co-optation.

The social is also the site where successfully politicized runaway needs get translated into claims for government provision. Here, rival need interpretations get translated into rival programmatic conceptions, rival alliances are forged around rival policy proposals, and unequally endowed groups compete to shape the formal policy agenda. For example, in the United States today, various interest groups, movements, professional associations, and parties are scrambling for formulations around which

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"Children's Interests/Mothers' Rights: A History of Public Child Care in the United States" (typescript). For an account of the current U.S. social-welfare system as a two-track, gendered system based on the assumption of separate economic and domestic spheres, see Nancy Fraser, "Women, Welfare and the Politics of Need Interpretation," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 2 (1987): 103–21.

16. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), esp. chap. 11, pp. 22–78. However, it should be noted that my view of the "social" differs significantly from Arendt's. Whereas she sees the social as a one-dimensional space wholly under the sway of administration and instrumental reason, I see it as multivalent and contested. Thus, my view incorporates some features of the Gramscian conception of "civil society."

17. It is significant that, in some times and places, the idea of the "social" has been elaborated explicitly as an alternative to the "political." For example, in nineteenth-century England, "the social" was understood as the sphere in which (middle-class) women's supposed distinctive domestic virtues could be diffused for the sake of the larger collective good without suffering the "degradation" of participation in the competitive world of "politics." Thus, "social" work, figured as "municipal motherhood," was heralded as an alternative to suffrage. See E. M. D. Riley, *"Am I That Name?" Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (London: Macmillan, in press). Similarly, the invention of sociology required the conceptualization of an order of "social" interaction distinct from "politics." See Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families* (New York: Pantheon, 1979).

to build alliances sufficiently powerful to dictate the shape of impending welfare "reform."

Eventually, if and when such contests are (at least temporarily) resolved, runaway needs may become objects of state intervention. Then, they become targets and levers for various strategies of crisis management. And they also become the raison d'être for the proliferation of the various agencies constituting the social state.[18] These agencies are engaged in regulating and/or funding and/or providing for the satisfaction of social needs. In so doing, they are in the business of interpreting, as well as of satisfying, the needs in question. For example, the U.S. social-welfare system is currently divided into two, gender-linked and unequal subsystems: an implicitly "masculine" social insurance subsystem tied to "primary" labor force participation and geared to (white male) "breadwinners"; and an implicitly "feminine" relief subsystem tied to household income and geared to homemaker-mothers and their "defective" (i.e., female-headed) families. With the underlying (but counterfactual) assumption of "separate spheres," the two subsystems differ markedly in the degree of autonomy, rights, and presumption of desert they accord beneficiaries, as well as in their funding base, mode of administration, and character and level of benefits.[19] Thus, the various agencies constituting the social-welfare system provide more than material aid. They also provide clients, and the public at large, with a tacit but powerful interpretive map of normative, differentially valued gender roles and gendered needs. Therefore, the different branches of the social state, too, are players in the politics of need interpretation.[20]

To summarize: in late-capitalist societies, runaway needs which have broken out of domestic or official-economic enclaves enter that hybrid discursive space that Arendt aptly dubbed the "social." They may then become foci of state intervention geared to crisis management. These needs are thus markers of major social-structural shifts in the boundaries separating what are classified as "political," "economic," and "domestic" or "personal" spheres of life.

III

There are two analytically distinct but practically articulated directions from which needs get politicized in welfare-state societies: roughly "from

18. Of course, the social state is not a unitary entity but a multiform, differentiated complex of agencies and apparatuses. In the United States, the social state comprises the welter of agencies that make up especially the Departments of Labor and of Health and Human Services—or what currently remains of them.

19. For an analysis of the gendered structure of the U.S. social-welfare system, see Fraser, "Women, Welfare and the Politics of Need Interpretation." Also, Barbara Nelson, "Women's Poverty and Women's Citizenship: Some Political Consequences of Economic Marginality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 10 (1984): 209–31; and Diana Pearce, "Women, Work and Welfare: The Feminization of Poverty," in *Working Women and Families,* ed. Karen Wolk Feinstein (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1979).

20. For an analysis of U.S. social-welfare agencies as purveyors and enforcers of need interpretations, see Fraser, "Women, Welfare and the Politics of Need Interpretation."

below" and "from above." In the first case, the initiative resides in what I call "oppositional" needs-talk; and the process involves the crystallization of new social identities on the part of subordinated persons and groups. In the second case, the initiative resides in what I call "expert" needs discourses, and the process involves "social problem-solving," institution-building, and professional class formation. Oppositional discourses and expert discourses represent two of the three major strands of needs-talk I discuss in this section, the other being the more reactive "reprivatization" discourses. In general, it is the polemical interaction of these three strands of needs-talk that structures the politics of needs in late-capitalist societies.[21]

Let us look first at the politicization of runaway needs via oppositional discourses. Here, needs become politicized when, for example, women, workers, and/or peoples of color come to contest the subordinate identities and roles, the traditional, reified, and disadvantageous need interpretations previously assigned to and/or embraced by them. By insisting on speaking publicly of heretofore depoliticized needs, by claiming for these needs the status of legitimate political issues, such persons and groups do several things simultaneously. First, they contest the established boundaries separating "politics" from "economics" and "domestics." Second, they offer alternative interpretations of their needs embedded in alternative chains of in-order-to relations. Third, they create new discourse publics from which they try to disseminate their interpretations of their needs throughout a wide range of different discourse publics. Finally, they challenge, modify, and/or displace hegemonic elements of the means of interpretation and communication; they invent new forms of discourse for interpreting their needs.

In oppositional discourses, needs-talk is a moment in the self-constitution of new collective agents or social movements. For example, in the current wave of feminist ferment, groups of women have politicized and reinterpreted various needs, have instituted new vocabularies and forms of address, and, so, have become "women" in a different, though not uncontested or univocal sense. By speaking publicly the heretofore unspeakable, by coining terms like 'sexism,' 'sexual harassment,' 'marital, date, and acquaintance rape,' 'labor force sex-segregation,' 'the double shift,' 'wife-battery,' and so forth, feminist women have become "women" in the sense of a discursively self-constituted political collectivity, albeit a very heterogeneous and fractured one.[22]

21. This picture is at odds with the one implicit in the writings of Foucault. From my perspective, Foucault focuses too single-mindedly on expert, institution-building discourses at the expense of oppositional and reprivatization discourses. Thus, he misses the dimension of contestation among competing discourses and the fact that the outcome is a result of such contestation. For all his theoretical talk about power without a subject, then, Foucault's practice as a social historian is surprisingly traditional in that de facto it treats expert institution builders as the only historical subjects.

22. The point could be reformulated more skeptically as follows: feminists have shaped discourses embodying a claim to speak for "women." In fact, this question of "speaking for 'women' " is currently a burning issue within the feminist movement. For an interesting

Of course, the politicization of needs in oppositional discourses does not go uncontested. One type of resistance involves defense of the established boundaries separating "political," "economic," and "domestic" spheres by means of "reprivatization" discourses. In these discourses, speakers oppose state provision for runaway needs and they seek to privatize or segment needs discourses that threaten to spill across a wide range of discourse publics.[23] Thus, reprivatizers may insist, for example, that domestic battery is not a legitimate subject of political discourse but a familial or religious matter. Or, to take a different example, that a factory closing is not a political question but an unimpeachable prerogative of "private" ownership or an unassailable imperative of an impersonal market mechanism. In both cases, the speakers are contesting the breakout of runaway needs and trying to (re)depoliticize them.

Interestingly, reprivatization discourses blend the old and the new. On the one hand, they seem merely to render explicit need interpretations which could earlier go without saying. But, on the other hand, by the very act of articulating such interpretations, they simultaneously modify them. Because reprivatization discourses respond to competing, oppositional interpretations, they are internally dialogized, incorporating references to the alternatives they resist, even while rejecting them. For example, although "pro-family" discourses of the social New Right are explicitly antifeminist, some of them incorporate in a depoliticized form feminist inspired motifs implying women's right to sexual pleasure and to emotional support from their husbands.[24]

In defending the established social division of discourses, reprivatization discourses deny the claims of oppositional movements for the legitimate political status of runaway needs. However, in so doing, they tend further to politicize those needs in the sense of increasing their cathectedness as foci of contestation. Moreover, in some cases, reprivatization discourses, too, become vehicles for mobilizing social movements and for reshaping social identities. Doubtless the most stunning example is Thatcherism in Britain where a set of reprivatization discourses articulated in the accents of authoritarian populism has refashioned the subjectivities

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take on it, see Riley, *"Am I That Name?"* For a thoughtful discussion of the general problem of the constitution and representation (in both senses) of social groups as sociological classes and as collective agents, see Pierre Bourdieu, "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups," *Social Science Information* 24 (1985): 195–220.

23. 'Reprivatization' has become the standard social-theoretical term for initiatives aimed at dismantling or cutting back social-welfare services, selling off nationalized assets, and/or deregulating "private" enterprise. My own usage combines this standard institutional, antistatist sense with the discursive sense of depoliticization.

24. See the chapter on "Fundamentalist Sex: Hitting below the Bible Belt," in Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, *Re-making Love: The Feminization of Sex* (New York: Anchor, 1987). For a fascinating account of "postfeminist" women incorporating feminist motifs into born-again Christianity, see Judith Stacey, "Sexism by a Subtler Name? Postindustrial Conditions and Postfeminist Consciousness in the Silicon Valley," *Socialist Review,* no. 96 (1987), pp. 7–28.

of a wide range of disaffected constituencies and united them in a powerful coalition.[25]

Together, oppositional discourses and reprivatization discourses codefine one axis of needs-struggle in late-capitalist societies. But there is also a second, rather different line of conflict. Here, the focal issue is no longer politicization versus depoliticization but rather the interpreted content of contested needs once their political status has been successfully secured. And the principal contestants are oppositional social movements and organized interests like businesses which seek to influence public policy.

For example, today in the United States, day care is gaining increasing legitimacy as a political issue. As a result, we are seeing the proliferation of competing interpretations and programmatic conceptions. In one view, day care would serve poor children's needs for "enrichment" and/or moral supervision. In a second, it would serve the middle-class taxpayer's need to get Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients off the welfare rolls. A third interpretation would shape day care as a measure for increasing the productivity and competitiveness of American business, while yet a fourth would treat it as part of a package of policies aimed at redistributing income and resources to women. Each of these interpretations carries a distinct programmatic orientation with respect to funding, institutional siting and control, service design, and eligibility. As they collide, we see a struggle to shape the hegemonic understanding of day care which may eventually make its way onto the formal political agenda. Clearly, not just feminist groups, but also business interests, trade unions, children's rights advocates, and educators are contestants in this struggle. And they bring to it vast differentials in power.[26]

The struggle for hegemonic need interpretations usually points toward the future involvement of the state. Thus, it anticipates yet a third axis of needs-struggle in late-capitalist societies. Here, the focal issues concern politics versus administration, and the principal contestants are oppositional social movements and the expert publics and agencies in the orbit of the social state.

Recall that the "social" is a site where needs which have become politicized in the discourse sense become candidates for state-organized provision. Consequently, these needs become the object of yet another group of discourses: the complex of "expert" "public policy" discourses based in various "private," "semi-public," and state institutions.

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25. See Stuart Hall, "Moving Right," *Socialist Review,* no. 55 (January–February 1981), pp. 113–37. For an account of New Right reprivatization discourses in the United States, see Barbara Ehrenreich, "The New Right Attack on Social Welfare," in Fred Block, Richard A. Cloward, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Frances Fox Piven, *The Mean Season: The Attack on the Welfare State* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), pp. 161–95.

26. I am indebted to Teresa Ghilarducci for this point (personal communication, February 1988).

Expert needs discourses are the vehicles for translating sufficiently politicized runaway needs into objects of potential state intervention. And they are closely connected with institutions of knowledge production and utilization.[27] They include qualitative and especially quantitative social-scientific discourses generated in universities and "think-tanks"; legal discourses generated in judicial institutions and their satellite schools, journals, and professional associations; administrative discourses circulated in various preexisting agencies of the social state; and therapeutic discourses circulated in public and private medical and social service agencies.

As the term suggests, "expert" discourses tend to be restricted to specialized publics. Thus, they are associated with professional class formation, institution-building, and social "problem-solving." But in some cases, such as law and psychotherapy, expert vocabularies and rhetorics are disseminated to a wider spectrum of educated laypersons, some of whom are participants in social movements. Moreover, social movements sometimes manage to co-opt or create critical, oppositional segments of expert discourse publics. For all these reasons, expert discourse publics sometimes acquire a certain porousness. And, expert discourses become the *bridge* discourses linking loosely organized social movements with the social state.

Because of this bridge role, the rhetoric of expert needs discourses tends to be administrative. These discourses consist in a series of rewriting operations, that is, procedures for translating politicized needs into administerable needs. Typically, the politicized need is redefined as the correlate of a bureaucratically administerable satisfaction—a "social service." It is specified in terms of an ostensibly general state of affairs which could, in principle, befall anyone—for example, unemployment, disability, or death or desertion of a spouse.[28] As a result, the need is decontextualized and recontextualized: on the one hand, it is represented in abstraction from its class, race, and gender specificity and from whatever oppositional meanings it may have acquired in the course of its politicization; on the other hand, it is cast in terms which tacitly presuppose such entrenched, specific background institutions as ("primary" versus "secondary") wage labor, privatized child rearing, and their gender-based separation.

As a result of these expert redefinitions, the people whose needs are in question are repositioned. They become individual "cases" rather than

27. In *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault provides a useful account of some elements of the knowledge production apparatuses which contribute to administrative redefinitions of politicized needs. However, Foucault overlooks the role of social movements in politicizing needs and the conflicts of interpretation which arise between such movements and the social state. His account suggests, incorrectly, that policy discourses emanate unidirectionally from specialized, governmental or quasi-governmental institutions; thus it misses the contestatory interplay among hegemonic and nonhegemonic, institutionally bound and institutionally unbound, interpretations.

28. Compare the discussion of the administrative logic of need definition in Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns,* vol. 2, *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), pp. 522–47.

members of social groups or participants in political movements. In addition, they are rendered passive, positioned as potential recipients of predefined services rather than as agents involved in interpreting their needs and shaping their life conditions.

By virtue of this administrative rhetoric, expert needs discourses, too, tend to be depoliticizing. They construe persons simultaneously as rational utility-maximizers and as causally conditioned, predictable, and manipulable objects, thereby screening out those dimensions of agency which involve the construction and deconstruction of social meanings.

Moreover, when expert needs discourses are institutionalized in state apparatuses, they tend to become normalizing, aimed at "reforming" or more often stigmatizing "deviancy."[29] This sometimes becomes explicit when services incorporate a therapeutic dimension designed to close the gap between clients' recalcitrant self-interpretations and the interpretations embedded in administrative policy.[30] Now the rational utility-maximizer-cum-causally-conditioned-object becomes, in addition, a deep self to be unraveled therapeutically.[31]

To summarize: when social movements succeed in politicizing previously depoliticized needs, they enter the terrain of the social where two other kinds of struggle await them. First, they have to contest powerful organized interests bent on shaping hegemonic need interpretations to their own ends. Second, they encounter expert needs discourses in and around the social state. These encounters define two additional axes of needs-struggle in late-capitalist societies. They are highly complex struggles, since social movements typically seek state provision of their runaway needs even while they tend to oppose administrative and therapeutic need interpretations. Thus, these axes, too, involve conflicts among rival interpretations of social needs and among rival constructions of social identity.

IV

Now I would like to try to apply the model I have been developing to some concrete cases of conflicts of need interpretation. The first example is designed to identify a tendency in welfare-state societies whereby the politics of need interpretation devolves into the management of need satisfactions. The second example, by contrast, charts the countertendency

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29. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* for an account of the normalizing dimensions of social science and of institutionalized social services.

30. Habermas discusses the therapeutic dimension of welfare-state social services, pp. 522–47.

31. In *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault discusses the tendency of social-scientifically informed administrative procedures to posit a deep self. In *The History of Sexuality,* vol. 1, *An Introduction,* trans. Robert Harley (New York: Pantheon, 1976), he discusses the positing of a deep self by therapeutic psychiatric discourses.

which runs from administration to resistance and potentially back to politics.[32]

First, consider the example of the politics of needs surrounding wife-battering. Until about fifteen years ago, the term 'wife-battering' did not exist. When spoken of publicly at all, this phenomenon was called 'wife-beating' and was often treated comically, as in "Have you stopped beating your wife?" Linguistically, it was classed with the disciplining of children and servants as a "domestic," as opposed to a "political," matter. Then, feminist activists renamed the practice with a term drawn from criminal law and created a new kind of public discourse. They claimed that battery was not a personal, domestic problem but a systemic, political one; its etiology was not to be traced to individual women's or men's emotional problems but, rather, to the ways these refracted pervasive social relations of male dominance and female subordination.

Thus, feminist activists contested established discursive boundaries and politicized a heretofore depoliticized phenomenon. In addition, they reinterpreted the experience of battery and they posited a set of associated needs. Here, they situated battered women's needs in a long chain of in-order-to relations which spilled across conventional separations of "spheres"; they claimed that, in order to be free from dependence on batterers, battered women needed not just temporary shelter but also jobs paying a "family wage," day care, and affordable permanent housing. Further, feminists created new discourse publics, new spaces and institutions in which such oppositional need interpretations could be developed and from which they could be spread to wider publics. Finally, feminists modified elements of the authorized means of interpretation and communication; they coined new terms of description and analysis and devised new ways of addressing female subjects. In their discourse, battered women were not addressed as individualized victims but as potential feminist activists, members of a politically constituted collectivity.

This discursive intervention was accompanied by feminist efforts to provide for some of the needs they had politicized and reinterpreted. Activists organized battered women's shelters—places of refuge and of consciousness-raising. The organization of these shelters was nonhierarchical; there were no clear lines between staff and users. Many of the counselors and organizers had themselves been battered; and a high percentage of the women who used the shelters went on to counsel other battered women and to become movement activists. Concomitantly, these women came to adopt new self-descriptions. Whereas most had originally blamed themselves and defended their batterers, many came to reject that interpretation in favor of a politicized view which offered them new

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32. For the sake of simplicity, I shall restrict the examples treated to cases of contestation between two forces only, where one of the contestants is an agency of the social state. Thus, I shall not consider examples of three-sided contestation, nor shall I consider examples of two-sided contestation between competing social movements.

models of agency. In addition, these women modified their affiliations and social identifications. Whereas many had originally felt deeply identified with their batterers, they later came to affiliate with other women.

This organizing eventually had an impact on wider discursive publics. By the late 1970s, feminists had largely succeeded in establishing domestic violence against women as a legitimate political issue. They managed in some cases to change attitudes and policies of police and the courts, and they won for this issue a place on the informal political agenda. Now the needs of battered women were sufficiently politicized to become candidates for publicly organized satisfaction. Finally, in several municipalities and localities, movement shelters began receiving local government funding.

From the feminist perspective, this represented a significant victory, but it was not without cost. Municipal funding brought with it a variety of new administrative constraints ranging from accounting procedures to regulation, accreditation, and professionalization requirements. As a consequence, publicly funded shelters underwent a transformation. Increasingly, they came to be staffed by professional social workers, many of whom had not themselves experienced battery. Thus, a division between professional and client supplanted the more fluid continuum of relations which characterized the earlier shelters. Moreover, many social work staff had been trained to frame problems in a quasi-psychiatric perspective. This perspective structures the practices of many publicly funded shelters even despite the intentions of individual staff, many of whom are politically committed feminists. Consequently, the practices of such shelters have become more individualizing and less politicized. Battered women tend now to be positioned as clients. They are increasingly psychiatrized; they are addressed as victims with deep, complicated selves. They are only rarely addressed as potential feminist activists. Increasingly, the language-game of therapy has supplanted that of consciousness-raising. And the neutral scientific language of "spouse abuse" has supplanted more political talk of "male violence against women."[33] Finally, the needs of battered women have been substantially reinterpreted. The very far-reaching earlier claims for the social and economic prerequisites of independence have tended to give way to a narrower focus on the individual woman's problems of "low self-esteem."

The battered women's shelter case exemplifies one tendency of needs politics in late-capitalist societies: the tendency for the politics of need interpretation to devolve into the administration of need satisfaction. However, there is also a countertendency which runs from administration to client resistance and potentially back to politics. I would like now to document this countertendency by drawing on sociologist Prudence Rains's

33. For an account of the history of battered women's shelters, see Susan Schechter, *Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1982).

comparative study of the "moral careers" of black and white pregnant teenagers in the late 1960s.[34]

Rains contrasts the ways the two groups of young women related to therapeutic constructions of their experience in two different institutional settings. One was a group of young middle-class white women in an expensive, private, residential facility; the other was a group of poor young black women in a nonresidential, municipal program. Both groups were provided with therapeutic services in addition to prenatal care and schooling. Both were required to attend individual and group counseling sessions with psychiatric social workers in which they were addressed as deep, complicated selves. Both were encouraged to regard their pregnancies as unconsciously motivated, meaningful acts expressive of latent emotional problems. This meant that a girl was to interpret her pregnancy—and the sex which was its superficial cause—as a form of acting out, say, a refusal of parental authority or a demand for parental love. She was warned that, unless she came to understand and acknowledge these deep, hidden motives, she would probably not succeed in avoiding future pregnancies. If, on the other hand, she did achieve such an understanding, the result would be a new autobiographical narrative which would occult the girl's sexuality and evade the potentially explosive issue of consent versus coercion in the teenage heterosexual milieu.

Rains contrasts the relative ease with which most of the young white women came to internalize this psychiatric perspective with the resistance of the young black women. The latter group was put off by the social worker's stance of nondirectiveness and moral neutrality—her unwillingness to say what *she* thought—and they resented what they considered her intrusive, overly personal questions in a context, they noted, in which they were not permitted to ask her such questions in return. In some instances, they openly challenged the rules of the therapeutic language-game. In others, they resisted indirectly by humor, quasi-deliberately misunderstanding the social worker's vague, nondirective, yet "personal" questions. For example, one girl construed, "How did you become pregnant?" as a "stupid" question and replied, "Shouldn't you know?" Another deflected the constant therapeutic, "How did it feel?" by taking it as a request for a graphic phenomenology of sexual pleasure and responding with banter and innuendo. In short, these young women devised a varied repertoire of strategies for resisting expert, normalizing, therapeutic constructions of their life stories and capacities for agency. They refused pressures to rewrite themselves as deep, complicated selves, while availing themselves of the health services at the facility. Thus, they made use of those aspects of the agency's program which they considered appropriate to their self-interpreted needs and ignored or side stepped the others.

34. Prudence Mors Rains, *Becoming an Unwed Mother: A Sociological Account* (Chicago: Aldine Atherton, 1971). I am indebted to Kathryn Pyne Addelson for bringing Rains's work to my attention.

Rains's work documents the sort of client resistance that remains informal, ad hoc, and cultural. However, there are also more formally organized, explicitly political forms of resistance. Clients of social-welfare programs may join together *as clients* to challenge administrative interpretations of their needs. They may take hold of the passivizing, normalizing, and individualizing or familializing identity fashioned for them by expert discourses and transform it into an identity which provides a basis for collective political action. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward have documented an example of this sort of move from administration to politics in their account of the process by which AFDC recipients organized the National Welfare Rights movement of the 1960s.[35] Notwithstanding the atomizing and depoliticizing dimensions of AFDC administration, these women were brought together in welfare waiting rooms. It was as a result of their participation as program clients, then, that they came to articulate common grievances and to act together. Thus, the same welfare practices which generated these grievances simultaneously generated the conditions for the possibility of collective organizing to combat them. As Piven put it, "the structure of the welfare state itself has helped to create new solidarities and generate the political issues that continue to cement and galvanize them."[36]

V

Let me conclude by flagging some issues which are central to this project but which I have not yet discussed in this essay. I have concentrated on social-theoretical issues at the expense of normative issues. But the latter are very important for a project, like mine, which aspires to be a critical social theory.

My analysis of needs-talk raises two very obvious and pressing normative issues. One is the question whether and how it is possible to distinguish better from worse interpretations of people's needs. The other is the question of the relationship between needs claims and rights. Although I cannot offer full answers to these questions here, I would like to indicate something about how I would approach them.

Pace the relativists, I would argue that we *can* distinguish better from worse interpretations of people's needs. To say that needs are culturally constructed and discursively interpreted is not to say that any need inter-

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35. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage, 1971), pp. 285–340, and *Poor People's Movements* (New York: Vintage, 1979). Unfortunately, Piven and Cloward's account is gender-blind and, as a consequence, androcentric. For a feminist critique, see Linda Gordon, "What Does Welfare Regulate? A Review Essay on the Writings of Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward," (typescript). For a more gender-sensitive account of the history of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), see Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger, 1981).

36. Frances Fox Piven, "Women and the State: Ideology, Power and the Welfare State," *Socialist Review*, no. 74 (1984), pp. 11–19.

pretation is as good as any other. On the contrary, it is to underline the importance of an account of interpretive justification.

In my view, there are at least two distinct kinds of considerations such an account would have to encompass and to balance. First, there are procedural considerations concerning the social processes by which various competing need interpretations are generated. For example, how exclusive or inclusive are various rival needs discourses? How hierarchical or egalitarian are the relations among the interlocutors? In general, procedural considerations dictate that, all other things being equal, the best need interpretations are those reached by means of communicative processes that most closely approximate ideals of democracy, equality, and fairness.[37]

In addition, consequentialist considerations are also relevant in justifying need interpretations. These considerations involve comparing alternative distributive outcomes of rival interpretations. For example, would widespread acceptance of some given interpretation of a social need disadvantage some groups of people vis-à-vis others? Does the interpretation conform to rather than challenge societal patterns of dominance and subordination? Are the rival chains of in-order-to relations to which competing need interpretations belong more or less respectful, as opposed to transgressive, of ideological boundaries that delimit "separate spheres" and thereby rationalize inequality? In general, consequentialist considerations dictate that, all other things being equal, the best need interpretations are those that do not disadvantage some groups of people vis-à-vis others.

In sum, justifying some interpretations of social needs as better than others involves balancing procedural and consequentialist considerations. More simply, it involves balancing democracy and equality.

What, then, of the relationship between needs and rights? Very briefly, I would argue in favor of the translatability of justified needs claims into social rights.[38] Like many radical critics of existing social-welfare programs, I am committed to opposing the forms of paternalism that arise when needs claims are divorced from rights claims. And unlike some communitarian, socialist, and feminist critics, I do not believe that rights-talk is inherently individualistic, bourgeois-liberal, and androcen-

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37. In its first-order normative content, this formulation is Habermassian. However, I do not wish to follow Habermas in giving it a transcendental or quasi-transcendental metainterpretation. Thus, while Habermas purports to ground "communicative ethics" in the conditions of possibility of speech understood universalistically and ahistorically, I consider it a contingently evolved, historically specific possibility. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action,* vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society,* trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1984), *Communication and the Evolution of Society,* trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1979), and *Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983).

38. I owe this formulation to Martha Minow (personal communication).

tric.[39] That is only the case where societies establish the *wrong* rights, for example, where the (putative) right to private property is permitted to trump other, social rights.

Moreover, to treat justified needs claims as the bases for new social rights is to begin to overcome obstacles to the effective exercise of some existing rights. It is true, as Marxists and others have claimed, that classical liberal rights to free expression, suffrage, and so forth are "merely formal." But this says more about the social context in which they are currently embedded than about their "intrinsic" character. For, in a context devoid of poverty, inequality, and oppression, formal liberal rights could be broadened and transformed into substantive rights, say, to collective self-determination.

Finally, I should stress that this work is motivated by the conviction that, for the time being, needs-talk is with us for better or worse. For the foreseeable future, political agents, including members of oppositional social movements, will have to operate on a terrain where needs-talk is the discursive coin of the realm. But, as I have tried to show, this idiom is neither inherently emancipatory nor inherently repressive. Rather, it is multivalent and contested. The larger aim of my project is to help clarify the prospects for democratic and egalitarian social change by sorting out the emancipatory from the repressive possibilities of needs-talk.

39. For an interesting discussion of the uses and abuses of rights discourse, see Elizabeth M. Schneider, "The Dialectic of Rights and Politics: Perspectives from the Women's Movement," *New York University Law Review* 61 (1986): 589–652. Also Martha Minow, "Interpreting Rights: An Essay for Robert Cover," *Yale Law Journal* 96 (1987): 1860–1915; and Patricia J. Williams, "Alchemical Notes: Reconstructed Ideals from Deconstructed Rights," *Harvard Civil Rights Civil Liberties Law Review* 22 (1987): 401–33.