

SHORT LOAN

Unruly Practices:
Power, Discourse, and
Gender in
Contemporary
Social Theory

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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 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.

Feminists (and others) who aim to intervene in this culture could benefit from considering the following questions: 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, like feminism, that seek far-reaching 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 five parts. In section 1, 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." Accordingly, 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 2, 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 section 3, I identify three major strands of needs talk in late capitalist political culture, and I map some of the ways in which they compete for potential adherents. In section 4, I apply the model to some concrete cases of contemporary needs politics in the United States. Finally, in a brief conclusion, I consider some moral and epistemological issues raised by the phenomenon of needs talk.

I

Let me begin by explaining some of the peculiarities of the approach I am proposing. 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 as pertaining to the distribution of satisfactions. In my approach, by contrast, the focus is *the politics of need interpretation*.

My 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 uncontroversially say that homeless people, like all people who live 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 entailed once we acknowledge their very general, thin need? Do homeless people need forbearance, so that they may 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 central city areas remote from good schools, discount shopping, and job opportunities? Single-family homes designed for single-earner, two-parent families? And 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 scatter-site public housing projects within a generally commodified housing environment? Rent control? Decommmodification 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 unravelled 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 at which people's assumptions and commitments diverge?

It is the implication of needs claims in contested networks of in-order-to relations to which I call attention when I speak of the politics of need interpretation. Thin theories of needs that do not undertake to explore such networks cannot shed much light on the politics of needs. 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 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 doesn't matter who interprets the needs in question and from what perspective and in the light of what interests; they thus overlook 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 neglect the question of 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 problematize the social and institutional logic of processes of need interpretation; they thus neglect 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-interpretors?

In order to remedy these blind spots, I propose a more politically critical, discourse-oriented alternative. I take the politics of needs to comprise three moments that are analytically distinct but interrelated in practice. The first is the struggle to establish or deny the political status of a given need, 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, 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" (MIC). By this 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 the following:

1. The officially recognized idioms in which one can press claims; for example, needs talk, rights talk, interests talk
2. The vocabularies available for instantiating claims in these recognized idioms; thus, with respect to needs talk, What are the vocabularies available for interpreting and communicating one's needs? For example, therapeutic vocab-

ularies, administrative vocabularies, religious vocabularies, feminist vocabularies, 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 that 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, as unique individuals or as members of social groups⁵

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.⁶ They therefore allude to a conflict of need interpretations. For example, groups seeking to restrict or outlaw abortion counterpose "the sanctity of life" to the "mere convenience" of "career women"; thus, they cast their claims in terms that refer, however disparagingly, to feminist interpretations of reproductive needs.⁷

Of course, late capitalist societies are not simply pluralist. Rather, they are stratified, differentiated into social groups with unequal status, power, and access to resources, traversed by pervasive axes of inequality along lines of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and age. The MIC in these societies are also stratified, organized in ways that are congruent with societal patterns of dominance and subordination.

It follows that we must distinguish those elements of the MIC that are hegemonic, authorized, and officially sanctioned, on the one hand, from those that 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 the mass circulation media. Other ways of talking about needs are enclaved as subcultural sociolects and normally excluded from the central discursive arenas.⁸ For example, moralistic and scientific discourses about the needs of people with AIDS, and of people at risk with respect to AIDS, are well represented on government commissions; in

contrast, gay and lesbian rights activists' interpretations of those needs are largely 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 neither case are the interpretations simply "representations." In both cases, rather, they are acts and interventions.⁹

2

Now I should like 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 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.¹⁰

Let me begin by noting that the terms 'politics' and 'political' are highly contested and have a number of different senses.¹¹ In the present context, two senses in particular are the most important. 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 'politicized'—contrasts both with what is not contested in public at all and with what is contested only in relatively specialized, enclaved, and/or segmented publics. 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.

In general, there are no 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, reproduction became an intensely political matter in the 1890s in the United States amid a panic about "race

suicide." By the 1940s, however, there was a consensus that birth control was a "private" matter. Finally, with the emergence of the women's movement in the 1960s, reproduction was repoliticized.¹²

However, 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.

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. Note, therefore, that it depends upon the ideal 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 to be differentiated, 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, for example, 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 that 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 politicize an issue simply by entertaining contestation about 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 previously was not "political," it is usually by far slower and more laborious means. In general, it is the relative power of various publics that determines the outcome of struggles over the boundaries of the political.

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 focuses 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 that previously enveloped newly politicized needs in late capitalist societies? What are the institutions in which these needs were enclaved and depoliticized, 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 what is "domestic" or "personal." Here, then, we can identify two principal sets of institutions that 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 and "private" enterprises and corporations.¹³ Domestic institutions depoliticize certain matters by personalizing and/or familiarizing them; they cast these as private-domestic or personal-familial matters in contradistinction 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 managers 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 prevented from spilling across the boundaries separating "the domestic" and "the economic" from "the political."

Clearly, domestic institutions 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 interpretations of needs by embedding them in certain specific, but largely unquestioned, chains of in-order-to relations.

Since both domestic and official economic system institutions support relations of dominance and subordination, the specific interpretations they naturalize usually tend, on the whole, to advantage dominant 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 "deviancy," then this serves to reproduce gender dominance and subordination.

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.

As a result of these processes, members of subordinated groups commonly internalize need interpretations that work to their own disadvantage. However, sometimes culturally dominant need interpretations are superimposed upon latent or embryonic oppositional interpretations. This is most likely where there persist, however fragmented, subculturally transmitted traditions of resistance, as in some sections of the U.S. labor movement and in the historical memory of many African-Americans. Moreover, under special circumstances, hard to specify theoretically, processes of depoliticization are disrupted. At that point 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 that 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, 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 that have broken out of the discursive enclaves constructed in and around domestic and official economic institutions.

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 chains of in-order-to relations that 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, the of-

ficial economy, and the state.¹⁶ As a site of contested discourse about runaway needs, "the social" cuts across these traditional divisions. It is 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 are transformed 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 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. 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 the satisfaction of social needs—and 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" (that is, 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 comprising 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. Consequently, 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 that have broken out of domestic or official economic enclaves enter that hybrid discursive space that Arendt aptly dubbed "the social." They may then become focuses 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.

3

Now I would like to propose a scheme for classifying the many varieties of needs talk in late capitalist societies. The point is to identify some distinct types of discourse and to map the lines along which they compete. This, in turn, will permit us to theorize some basic axes of needs politics in welfare state societies.

I suggest there are three major kinds of needs discourses in late capitalist societies. First, there are what I call "oppositional" forms of needs talk, which arise when needs are politicized "from below." These contribute to the crystallization of new social identities on the part of subordinated social groups. Second, there are what I call "reprivatization" discourses, which emerge in response to the first. These articulate entrenched need interpretations that could previously go without saying. Finally, there are what I call "expert" need discourses, which link popular movements to the state. These can best be understood in the context of "social problem solving," institution building, and professional class formation. In general, it is the polemical interaction of these three kinds 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 battering', and so on, feminist women have become "women" in the sense of a discursively self-constituted political collectivity, albeit a very heterogeneous and fractured one.²²

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. Institutionally, "reprivatization" designates initiatives aimed at dismantling or cutting back social-welfare services, selling off nationalized assets, and/or deregulating "private" enterprise; discursively, it means depoliticization. Thus, in reprivatization discourses, speakers oppose state provision of runaway needs, and they seek to contain forms of needs talk that threaten to spill across a wide range of discourse publics. 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 are trying to (re)depoliticize them.

Interestingly, reprivatization discourses blend the old and the new. On the one hand, they seem merely to render explicit those need interpretations that 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.²³

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 cathedness as focuses 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 re-

fashioned the subjectivities of a wide range of disaffected constituencies and united them in a powerful coalition.²⁴

Together, oppositional discourses and reprivatization discourses define 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 business, that 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 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.²⁵

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 experts and agencies in the orbit of the social state.

Recall that "the social" is a site where needs that 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.

Expert needs discourses are the vehicles for translating sufficiently politicized runaway needs into objects of potential state intervention. They are closely connected with institutions of knowledge production and utilization,²⁶ and they include qualitative and especially quantitative social science 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 agencies of the social state; and thera-

peutic 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 porosity. 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, procedures for translating politicized needs into administrable needs. Typically, the politicized need is redefined as the correlate of a bureaucratically administrable satisfaction, a "social service." It is specified in terms of an ostensibly general state of affairs that could, in principle, befall anyone—for example, unemployment, disability, death or desertion of a spouse.²⁷ 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 that tacitly presuppose such entrenched, specific background institutions as ("primary" versus "secondary") wage labor, privatized childrearing, 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 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 human agency that 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."²⁸ 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.²⁹ Now the rational-utility-maximizer-cum-causally-conditioned-object becomes, in addition, a deep self to be unraveled therapeutically.³⁰

To summarize: when social movements succeed in politicizing previously depoliticized needs, they enter the terrain of the social, where two other kinds of struggles 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.

4

Now I would like 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. A second group of examples, by contrast, charts the counterendency that runs from administration to resistance and potentially back to politics.³¹

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 problems reflected 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 posited a set of associated needs. Here, they situated battered women's needs in a long chain of in-order-to relations that 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