Talking About Needs[1]

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Need is also a political instrument, meticulously prepared, calculated and used.

– Michel Foucault[2]

In late-capitalist, welfare-state societies, talk about people's needs is an important species of political discourse. We argue, for example, about whether the government ought to provide for health and day care needs, 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 the latter. 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.[3] It co-

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[1] Many of the ideas in this paper were first developed in my "Social Movements versus Disciplinary Bureaucracies," CHS Occasional Paper No. 8 (Center for Humanistic Studies, The University of Minnesota, 1987). I am grateful for helpful comments from Sandra Bartky, Paul Mattick, Frank Michelman, Linda Nicholson and Iris Young. The Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute of Radcliffe College provided crucial financial support and a utopian working situation.

[2] *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 26.

[3] In this paper, 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

exists, albeit often uneasily, with talk about rights and interests at the very center of political life. Indeed, this peculiar linkage 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.' And I propose a model of social discourse designed to bring into relief the contested and conflictual 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 U.S.

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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 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.

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 uncontroversially say that the homeless, 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? Concentrated or scatter 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 unravelled in the course of political disputes, disagreements usually deepen rather than abate. Precisely how such chains are unravelled depends on what the interlocutors share in the way of background assump-

tions. 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.[4] 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 is unproblematic who interprets the needs in question and from what perspective and in the light of what interest; 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.[5] 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?

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[4] A recent example of the kind of theory I have in mind is David Braybrooke, *Meeting Needs* (Princeton: 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.

[5] For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Nancy Fraser, "Toward a Discourse Ethic of Solidarity." *Praxis International*, Vol. 5, no. 4 (January 1986), pp. 425-29.

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, 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 socio-cultural means of interpretation and communication.' By socio-cultural 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, interests-talk.

2. the vocabularies available for instantiating claims in these recognized idioms; the vocabularies available for interpreting and communicating one's needs: for example, therapeutic vocabularies, 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 which are constitutive of subjects' 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 groups.[6]

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 a plurality of possible interpretations. Particular claims about needs are 'internally dialogized'; implicitly or explicitly they evoke resonances of alternative need interpretations. They therefore allude to a conflict of need interpretations.[7]

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[6] For another account of this idea of the socio-cultural means of interpretation and communication, see Fraser, "Toward a Discourse Ethic of Solidarity," *ibid.*

[7] I am in effect claiming that the Bakhtinian notion of a dialogic heteroglossia 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, contestatory 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 *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259-422. For a helpful secondary account, see Dominick LaCapra, "Bakhtin, Marxism and the Carnivalesque," in *Rethinking Intellectual History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 294-324. For a critique of the Romantic, anti-modernist bias in both Bakhtin and LaCapra, see Nancy Fraser, "On the Political and the Symbolic: Against the Metaphysics of Textuality," *enclitic*, 17/18, vol. 9, nos. 1-2 (1987), pp. 100-114.

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, traversed by pervasive axes of inequality along lines of class, gender, race, ethnicity and age. And the MIC in these societies are also stratified, 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 elements are institutionalized in the central discursive arenas of late-capitalist societies: parliaments, academies, courts and mass circulation media. Others are enclaved as subcultural sociolects and normally excluded from the central discursive arenas.[8]

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 coopt 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.[9]

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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[8] 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*, Richard Nice, tr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Also, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Pure Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

[9] 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 (unpublished ms).

boundaries separating what are classified as 'political,' 'economic,' and 'domestic' spheres of life in these societies.[10]

Let me begin by noting that the terms 'politics' and 'political' are highly contested and they have a number of different senses.[11] 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.[12]

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10 It is important to note that I am treating these terms as cultural classifications and ideological labels rather than as designations of structures, spheres or things. For a thoughtful discussion of the advantages of such an approach, see Paul Mattick, "On *Feminism as Critique*," (unpublished ms).

11 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.'

12 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 upon 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, 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

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.

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.

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. Certainly, in late-capitalist societies, one of the primary stakes of social contestation 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 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 depoliticized, where

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American Bar Association), by mobilizing focal '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 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.

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 and 'private' enterprises and corporations.[13] Domestic institutions depoliticize certain matters by personalizing and/or familializing 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, depoliticization truncates chains of in-order-to relations for interpreting needs which would spill across the boundaries that constitute the domain.

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

Moreover, 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 phe-

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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 (Spring/Summer), pp. 97-131.

nomenon 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 subordination. Similarly, if questions of workplace democracy are enclaved as 'economic' or 'managerial' problems in profit-oriented, hierarchically managed 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.

Family and official-economy, then, 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, 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 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.[14] Here, the assumption of sep-

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[14] 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*, Margaret Higonnet, Jane Jenson and Sonya Michel, eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) and "Children's Interests/Mothers' Rights: A History of Public Child Care in the United States" (unpublished 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*, vol.2 no. 1 (Winter 1987), pp. 103-121.

arate spheres truncates possible 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.[15] 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.[16]

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 compromise.

The social is also the site where successfully politicized runaway needs get translated into claims for government provision. Here, rival need inter-

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15 See Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), especially chapter II, 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.'

16 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 19th 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, forthcoming). Similarly, the invention of sociology required the conceptualization of an order of 'social' interaction distinct from 'politics.' See Jacques Donzelet, *The Policing of Families* (New York: Pantheon, 1979).

pretations 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.

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 *raisons d'etre* for the proliferation of the various agencies comprising the social state.[17] 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. Therefore, the different branches of the social state, too, are players in the politics of need interpretation.

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 between what are classified as 'political,' 'economic' and 'domestic' or 'personal' spheres of life.

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[17] Of course, the social state is not a unitary entity but a multiform, differentiated complex of agencies and apparatuses. In the U.S. 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.