Andrew Mills, Summary: Nancy Fraser’s “Struggle over Needs”

In the “Struggle over Needs”, Fraser introduces the concept of “needs talk” as a political discourse used to attract intervention of the welfare state into the social realm. Needs talk is a vocabulary used by various groups to make and contest political claims. The needs of interest to Fraser are the “thick” needs that involve nesting of claims and assumptions, as opposed to “thin” needs, such as food and shelter, which are readily apparent and uncontested. The thick needs are nested in claims of needs “in order to” reach some end point, for instance a claim of a need for a good paying job in order to have shelter. This claim masks many assumptions that become unraveled in political conflicts.

Fraser focuses on the use of needs talk by social movements within the context of a welfare state. Her intended audience is those interested in intervening in a culture in which she describes needs talk as having similar political status as talk about rights and interests. Needs talk is used to bring an issue out of a depoliticized domain, such as the economic or domestic sphere, and into the political domain. Groups argue that they have needs that are not being met within the sphere in which the group operates. The status of the group can be changed in a welfare state by politicizing the issue, allowing the group to contest their current status and try to convince the state to intervene and meet their needs in a different manner.

Contestation of needs claims is a persistent phenomenon, with groups constantly attempting to move issues out of domestic and economic spheres and groups with a vested interest in the status quo maintaining the boundary. Events that allow issues to move out of the margins and firmly into the political sphere subject the claims to further contestation through political discourses - with one group petitioning for state intervention and the other clamoring for re-depoliticization of the issue.

The importance of this paper goes beyond the descriptive power of the model presented by Fraser. It is unique in that she forcefully challenges the idea that needs can be objectively determined; as she puts it, there is “no pre-established point of epistemic superiority” when it comes to interpretation of needs. Instead, need interpretations “emanate from specific, interested locations within society.” Furthermore, in this late capitalist society, whose needs are recognized, or what group has the power to politicize an issue, is greatly influenced by the unequal status, power, and access to resources that characterize our pluralistic and stratified society.

Fraser’s work is well situated with the post-positivist idea that the language used in political realm is more the medium for constructing the world than a neutral means of describing an objective reality, as described by Hajer’s “Discourse Coalitions and the Institutionalization of Practice”. Hajer finds that control over language to create the world is important in that it decides if a problem is inherently political. Similarly, Fraser shows that needs talk is used to create a narrative of the world in which a problem should be politicized, ultimately requiring an intervention by the state. Furthermore, Fraser describes a coherent framework for understating how groups obtain access to scarce resources. In Ribot and Peluso’s “Theory of Access”, the process of identifying and mapping the mechanisms by which access to benefits derived from resources is gained, maintained and controlled is a key step in access analysis. Fraser’s discussion elucidates the way need discourses can be used to shift and gain access through politicization and intervention by a welfare state.
• Disputes involving what exactly various groups of people really do need and about who should have the last word in such matters. In these cases, moreover, 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.

• In welfare state societies needs talk has been institutionalized as a major vocabulary of political discourse. 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?

• 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?

• Shifts focus of inquiry from needs to discourses about needs, from distribution of need satisfactions to “the politics of need interpretation.” Discourses about 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.

• Needs claims have a relational structure: the form “A needs x in order to y”. Claims tend to be tested, 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. 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 deflect attention from a number of important political questions: (1) 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; (2) 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; (3) 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) 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-interpreters?

• Remedy these blind spots: politics of needs comprises three moments that are analytically distinct but interrelated in practice: (1) 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: (2) the struggle over the interpretation of the need, the struggle for the power to define it and, so, to determine what would satisfy it: (3) the struggle over the satisfaction of the need, the struggle to secure or withhold provision.

• 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. Sociocultural means of interpretation and communication (MIC) 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) **Officially recognized idioms** in which one can press claims; for example, needs talk, rights talk, interests talk  
2) **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 vocabularies, administrative vocabularies, religious vocabularies, feminist vocabularies, socialist vocabularies.  
3) **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) **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 groups.

• 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 a resonances of competing need interpretations. They therefore allude to a conflict of need interpretations

- 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 non-hegemonic, 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 dialects and normally excluded from the central discursive arenas.

- From this perspective needs talk appears as a site of struggle where groups with unequal discursive (and non-discursive) resources compete to establish as hegemonic their respective interpretations of legitimate social needs. Dominant groups 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

II Social-structural features of late capitalist societies

- The rise of politicized needs talk is related to shifts in the boundaries separating “political,” “economic” and “domestic” dimensions of life. I shall treat the terms political, economic, and domestic as cultural classifications and ideological labels rather than as designations of structures spheres, or things.

- (1) Political- 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--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.

- (2) 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. One of the primary stakes of social conflict in late capitalist societies is precisely where the limits of the political will be drawn.

- Some 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, by stratification principles like gender, and class, by profession, by central mobilizing issue.

- 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. Bourdieu-social genesis of groups and structuralism

- 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, counter-hegemonic publics, by contrast, generally lack the power to politicize issues in this way. When they succeed in fermenting 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.

- 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”. Here then, we can identify two principal sets of institutions that depoliticize social discourses: domestic institutions and official economic capitalist system institutions.

- Official economic capitalist system institutions, 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 these 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 systems 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, to advantage dominant groups and individuals and to disadvantage their subordinates.

• **There is a section on capital appraisals**—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.

• 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. 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 Arendt, I call this arena “the social” in order to mark its non-coincidence with the family, the official economy and the state. 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.

--The social is a site for the meeting of heterogeneous contestants associated with a wide range of different discourse publics.

--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.

• Eventually, if and when such contests are 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 raisons d’être for the proliferation of the various agencies constituting the social state. 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.

• 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.

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**III. Identify some distinct types of discourse and to map the lines along which they compete. This will permit to theorize some basic axes of needs politics in welfare state societies.**
• Three major kinds of needs discourses in late capitalist societies. (1) oppositional forms of needs talk, which arise when needs are politicized from below. These contribute to the crystalization of new social identities on the part of subordinated social groups (2) reprivatization discourses, which emerge in response to the first. These articulate entrenched need interpretations that could previously go without saying. (3) 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.

• (1) politicization of runaway needs via oppositional discourses. Needs become politicized when (for example) people come to contest the subordinate identities and roles assigned 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. (1) they contest the established boundaries separating “politics” from “economics” and domestics.” (2), they offer alternative interpretations of their needs embedded in alternative chains of in-order-to relations. (3) they create new discourse publics from which they try to disseminate their interpretations of their needs throughout a wide range of different discourse publics. (4) 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.

• (2) 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....speakers are contesting the breakout of runaway needs and are trying to (re) depoliticize them.

• 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 of contested needs once their political status has been successfully secured. And the principle contestants are oppositional social movements and organized interests, like business, that seek to influence public policy.

• Each interpretation carries a distinct programmatic orientation with respect to funding, institutional citing 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.

- 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, 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 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, institutions 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, 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”.

- 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 agents involved in interpreting their needs and shaping their life conditions.

- To summarize: when social movements succeed in politicizing previously depoliticized needs, they enter the terrain of the social, where tow 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 tow additional axes of needs struggle in late capitalist societies.