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# ***Women, Welfare and the Politics of Need Interpretation\****

***Nancy Fraser***

What some writers are calling “the coming welfare wars” will be largely wars about, even against, women. Because women comprise the overwhelming majority of social-welfare program recipients and employees, women and women’s needs will be the principal stakes in the battles over social spending likely to dominate national politics in the coming period. Moreover, the welfare wars will not be limited to the tenure of Reagan or even of Reaganism. On the contrary, they will be protracted wars both in time and in space. What James O’Connor theorized nearly fifteen years ago as “the fiscal crisis of the state” is a long-term, structural phenomenon of international proportions. Not just the U.S., but every late-capitalist welfare state in Western Europe and North America is facing some version of it.<sup>1</sup> And the fiscal crisis of the welfare state coincides everywhere with a second long-term, structural tendency: the feminization of poverty. This is Diana Pearce’s term for the rapidly increasing proportion of women in the adult poverty population, an increase tied to, *inter alia*, the rise in “female-headed households.”<sup>2</sup> In the U.S., this trend is so pronounced and so steep that analysts project that, should it continue, the poverty population will consist entirely of women and their children before the year 2000.<sup>3</sup>

This conjunction of the fiscal crisis of the state and the feminization of poverty suggests that struggles around social-welfare will and should become increasingly focal for feminists. But such struggles raise a great many problems. Some of these, like the following, can be thought of as structural: On the one hand, increasing number of women depend directly for their livelihoods on social-welfare programs; and many others benefit indirectly, since the existence of even a minimal and inadequate “safety net” increases the leverage of women who are economically dependent on individual men. Thus, feminists have no choice but to oppose social-welfare cuts. On the other hand, economists like Pearce, Nancy Barrett and Steven Erie, Martin Rein and Barbara Wiget have shown that programs like aid to Families with Dependent Children

actually institutionalize the feminization of poverty.<sup>4</sup> The benefits they provide are system-conforming ones which reinforce rather than challenge basic structural inequalities. Thus, feminists cannot simply support existing social-welfare programs. To use the suggestive but ultimately too simple terms popularized by Carol Brown: If to eliminate or to reduce welfare is to bolster “private patriarchy,” then simply to defend it is to consolidate “public patriarchy.”<sup>5</sup>

Feminists also face a second set of problems in the coming welfare wars. These problems, seemingly more ideological and less structural than the first set, arise from the typical way in which issues get framed as a result of the institutional dynamics of the political system.<sup>6</sup> Typically, social-welfare issues are posed as follows: Shall the state undertake to satisfy the social needs of a given constituency and to what degree? Now, this way of framing issues permits only a relatively small number of answers; and it tends to cast debates in quantitative terms. More importantly, it takes for granted the definition of the needs in question, as if that were self-evident and beyond dispute. It therefore occludes the facts that the interpretation of people’s needs is itself a political stake, indeed sometimes *the* political stake. Clearly, this way of framing issues poses obstacles for feminist politics, since at the heart of such politics lie questions like, what do various groups of women really need, and whose interpretations of women’s needs should be authoritative. Only in terms of a discourse oriented to the *politics of need interpretation*<sup>7</sup> can feminists meaningfully intervene in the coming welfare wars. But this requires a challenge to the dominant policy framework.

Both sets of problems, the structural and the ideological, are extremely important and difficult. In what follows, I shall not offer solutions to either of them. Rather, I want to attempt the much more modest and preliminary task of exploring how they might be thought about in relation to one another. Specifically, I want to propose a framework for inquiry which can shed light on both of them simultaneously.

Consider that, in order to address the structural problem, it will be necessary to clarify the phenomenon of “public patriarchy.” One type of inquiry which is useful here is the familiar sort of economic analysis alluded to earlier, analysis which shows, for example, that “workfare” programs function to subsidize employers of low-wage, “women’s work” in the service sector and thus to reproduce the sex-segmented, dual-labor market. Now, important as such inquiry is, it does not tell the whole story, since it leaves out of focus the discursive or ideolocal dimension of social-welfare programs. By the discursive or ideological dimension, I do not mean anything distinct from or epiphenomenal with respect to welfare practices; I mean, rather, the tacit norms and implicit assumptions which are constitutive of those practices. To get at this

dimension requires a meaning-oriented sort of inquiry, one which considers welfare programs as, among other things, institutionalized patterns of interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Such inquiry would make explicit the social meanings embedded within welfare programs, meanings which tend otherwise simply to go without saying.

In spelling out such meanings, the inquiry I am proposing could do two things simultaneously. First, it could tell us something important about the structure of the U.S. welfare system, since it might identify some underlying norms and assumptions which lend a measure of coherence to diverse programs and practices. Second, it could illuminate what I called "the politics of need interpretation," since it could expose the processes by which welfare practices construct women and women's needs according to certain specific and in principle contestable interpretations, even as they lend those interpretations an aura of facticity which discourages contestation. Thus, this inquiry could shed light on both the structural and ideological problems identified earlier.

The principal aim of this paper is to provide an account of this sort for the present U.S. social-welfare system. The account is intended to help clarify some key structural aspects of male dominance in welfare-capitalist societies. At the same time, it is meant to point the way to a broader, discourse-oriented focus which can address political conflicts over the interpretation of women's needs.

The paper proceeds from some relatively "hard," uncontroversial facts about the U.S. social-welfare system (section I) through a series of increasingly interpreted accounts of that system (sections II and III). These culminate (in section IV) in a highly theorized characterization of the welfare system as a "juridical-administrative-therapeutic state apparatus" (JAT). Finally, (in section V) the paper situates that apparatus as one actor among others in a larger and highly contested political field of discourse about needs which also includes the feminist movement.

## I

Long before the emergence of welfare-states, governments have defined legally secured arenas of societal action. In so doing, they have at the same time codified corresponding patterns of agency or social roles. Thus, early modern states defined an economic arena and the corresponding role of an economic person capable of entering into contracts. More or less at the same time, they codified the "private sphere" of the household and the role of household head with dependents. Somewhat later, governments were led to secure a sphere of political participation and the corresponding role of citizen with (limited) political rights. In each of these cases, the original and paradigmatic

subject of the newly codified social role was male. Only secondarily and much later was it conceded that women, too, could occupy these subject-positions, without however entirely dispelling the association with masculinity.

Matters are different, however, with the contemporary welfare-state. When this type of government defined a new arena of activity — call it “the social” — and a new societal role, the welfare client, it included women among its original and paradigmatic subjects. Today, in fact, women have become the principal subjects of the welfare state. On the one hand, they comprise the overwhelming majority both of program recipients and of paid social service workers. On the other hand, they are the wives, mothers and daughters whose unpaid activities and obligations are redefined as the welfare state increasingly oversees forms of caregiving. Since this beneficiary-social worker-caregiver nexus of roles is constitutive of the social-welfare arena, one might even call the latter a feminized terrain.

A brief statistical overview confirms women’s greater involvement with and dependence on the U.S. social-welfare system. Consider first women’s greater dependence as program clients and beneficiaries. In each of the major “means-tested” programs in the U.S., women and the children for whom they are responsible now comprise the overwhelming majority of clients. For example, more than 81% of households receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) are headed by women; more than 60% of families receiving food stamps or Medicaid are headed by women; and 70% of all households in publicly owned or subsidized housing are headed by women.<sup>9</sup> High as they are, these figures actually underestimate the representation of women. As Barbara Nelson notes, in the androcentric reporting system, households counted as female-headed by definition contain no healthy adult men.<sup>10</sup> But healthy adult women live in most households counted as male-headed. Such women may directly or indirectly receive benefits going to “male-headed” households, but they are invisible in the statistics, even though they usually do the work of securing and maintaining program eligibility.

Women also predominate in the major U.S. “age-tested” programs. For example, 61.6% of all adult beneficiaries of Social Security are women; and 64% of those covered by Medicare are women.<sup>11</sup> In sum, because women as a group are significantly poorer than men — indeed they now comprise nearly two-thirds of all U.S. adults below the official poverty line — and because women tend to live longer than men, women depend more on the social-welfare system as clients and beneficiaries.

But this is not the whole story. Women also depend more on the social-welfare system as paid human service workers — a category of employment which includes education and health, as well as social work and services administration. In 1980, 70% of the 17.3 million paid jobs in

this sector in the U.S. were held by women. This accounts for one-third of U.S. women's total paid employment and a full 80% of all professional jobs held by women. The figures for women of color are even higher than this average, since 37% of their total paid employment and 82.4% of their professional employment is in this sector.<sup>12</sup> It is distinctive feature of the U.S. social-welfare system, as opposed to, say, the British and Scandinavian systems, that only 3% of these jobs are in the form of direct federal government employment. The rest are in state and local government, in the "private non-profit" sector and in the "private" sector. But the more decentralized and privatized character of the U.S. system does not make paid welfare workers any less vulnerable in the face of federal program cuts. On the contrary, the level of federal social-welfare spending affects the level of human service employment in *all* sectors. State and local government jobs depend on federal and federally-financed state and local government contracts; and private profit and non-profit jobs depend on federally financed transfer payments to individuals and households for the purchase of services like health care in the market.<sup>13</sup> Thus, reductions in social spending mean the loss of jobs for women. Moreover, as Barbara Ehrenreich and Frances Fox Piven note, this loss is not compensated when spending is shifted to the military, since only 0.5% of the entire female paid workforce is employed in work on military contracts.<sup>14</sup> In fact, one study they cite estimates that with each one billion dollar increase in military spending, 9500 jobs are lost to women.

Finally, women are subjects of and to the social-welfare system in their traditional capacity as unpaid caregivers. It is well known that the sexual division of labor assigns women primary responsibility for the care of those who cannot care for themselves. (I leave aside women's traditional obligations to provide personal services to adult males — husbands, fathers, grown sons, lovers — who can very well care for themselves.) Such responsibility includes child care, of course, but also care for sick and/or elderly relatives, often parents. For example, a 1975 British study cited by Hilary Land found that three times as many elderly people live with married daughters as with married sons and that those without a close female relative were more likely to be institutionalized, irrespective of degree of infirmity.<sup>15</sup> As unpaid caregivers, then, women are more directly affected than men by the level and character of government social services for children, the sick and the elderly.

As clients, paid human service workers and unpaid caregivers, then, women are the principal subjects of the social-welfare system. It is as if this branch of the state were in effect a "Bureau of Women's Affairs."

## II

Of course, the welfare system does not deal with women on women's terms. On the contrary, it has its own characteristic ways of interpreting women's needs and positioning women as subjects. In order to understand these, we need to examine how gender norms and meanings are reflected in the structure of the U.S. social-welfare system.

This issue is quite complicated. On the one hand, nearly all U.S. social-welfare programs are officially gender neutral. Yet the system as a whole is a dual or two-tiered one; and it has an unmistakable gender subtext.<sup>16</sup> There is one set of programs oriented primarily to *individuals* tied to participation in the paid workforce, for example, unemployment insurance and Social Security. These programs are designed to supplement and compensate for the market in paid labor power. There is a second set of programs oriented to *households* and tied to combine household income, for example, AFDC, food stamps and Medicaid. These programs are designed to compensate for what are considered to be family failures, generally the absence of a male breadwinner.

What integrates the two sets of programs is a common core of assumptions, underlying both, concerning the sexual division of labor, domestic and non-domestic. It is assumed that families do or should contain one primary breadwinner who is male and one unpaid domestic worker (homemaker and mother) who is female. It is further assumed that when a woman undertakes paid work outside the home this is or should be in order to supplement the male breadwinner's wage and so it neither does nor ought override her primary housewifely and maternal responsibilities. It is assumed, in other words, that society is divided into two separate spheres of home and outside work and that these are women's and men's spheres respectively.<sup>17</sup>

These assumptions are increasingly counterfactual. At present, fewer than 15% of U.S. families conform to the normative ideal of a domicile shared by a husband who is the sole breadwinner, a wife who is a full-time homemaker and their offspring.

Nonetheless, the separate spheres norms determine the structure of the social-welfare system. They determine that it contain a primary labor market-related subsystem and a family — or household-related subsystem. Moreover, they determine that these subsystems be gender-linked, that the labor market-related system be implicitly "masculine" and the family-related system be implicitly "feminine." Consequently, the ideal-typical recipient of primary labor market-oriented programs is a (white) male, while the normative, ideal-typical client of household-based programs is a female.

This gender subtext of the U.S. welfare system is confirmed when we take a second look at participation figures. Consider again the figures just



cited for the “feminine” or family-based programs, which I earlier referred to as “means-tested” programs; more than 81% of households receiving AFDC are female-headed, as are more than 70% of those receiving housing assistance and more than 60% of those receiving Medicaid and food stamps. Now recall that these figures do not compare female vs. male individuals, but rather female vs. male headed *households*. They therefore confirms four things: 1) these programs have a distinctive administrative identity in that their recipients are not individualized but *familialized*; 2) they serve what are considered to be defective families, overwhelmingly families without a male breadwinner; 3) the ideal-typical (adult) client is female; and 4) she makes her claim for benefits on the basis of her status as an unpaid domestic worker, a homemaker and mother, not as a paid worker based in the labor market.

Now contrast this with the case of a typical labor market-based and thus “masculine” program, namely, unemployment insurance. Here the percentage of female claimants drops to 38%, a figure which contrasts female vs. male *individuals*, as opposed to households. As Diana Pearce notes, this drop reflects at least two different circumstances.<sup>18</sup> First, and most straight-forwardly, it reflects women’s lower rate of participation in the paid workforce. Second, it reflects the fact that many women wage-workers are not eligible to participate in this program, for example, paid household service workers, part-time workers, pregnant workers and workers in the “irregular economy” such as prostitutes, baby-sitters, and home typists. The exclusion of these predominantly female wage-workers testifies to the existence of a gender segmented labor market, divided into “primary” and “secondary” employment. It reflects the more general assumption that women’s earnings are “merely supplementary,” not on a par with those of the primary (male) breadwinner. Altogether, then, the figures tell us four things about programs like unemployment insurance: 1) they are administered in a way which *individualizes* rather than *familializes* recipients; 2) they are designed to compensate primary labor market effects, such as the temporary displacement of a primary breadwinner; 3) the ideal-typical recipient is male; and 4) he makes his claim on the basis of his identity as a paid worker, not as an unpaid domestic worker or parent.

One final example will round out the picture. The Social Security system of retirement insurance presents the interesting case of a hermaphrodite or androgyne. I shall soon show that this system has a number of characteristic of “masculine” programs in virtue of its link to participation in the paid workforce. However, it is also internally dualized and gendered, and thus stands as a microcosm of the entire dual-benefit welfare system. Consider that while a majority — 61.6% — of adult beneficiaries are female, only somewhat more than half of these — or 33.3% of all recipients — claim benefits on the basis of their own



paid work records.<sup>19</sup> The remaining female recipients claim benefits on the basis of their husbands' records, that is, as wives or unpaid domestic workers. By contrast, virtually no male recipients claim benefits as husbands. On the contrary, they claim benefits as paid workers, a labor market-located as opposed to family-located identity. So the Social Security system is hermaphrodite or androgynous; it is internally divided between family-based, "feminine" benefits, on the one hand, and labor market-based, "masculine" benefits, on the other hand. Thus, it too gets its structure from gender norms and assumptions.

### III

So far, we have established the dualistic structure of the U.S. social-welfare system and the gender subtext of the dualism. Now, we can better tease out the system's implicit norms and tacit assumptions by examining its mode of operation. To see how welfare programs interpret women's needs, we should consider what benefits consists in. To see how programs position women as subjects, we should examine administrative practices. In general, we shall see that the "masculine" and "feminine" subsystems are not only separate but also unequal.

Consider that the "masculine" social-welfare programs are social insurance schemes. They include unemployment insurance, Social Security (retirement insurance), Medicare (age-tested health insurance) and Supplemental Social Security Insurance (disability insurance for those with paid work records). These programs are contributory; wage-workers and their employers pay into trust funds. They are administered on a national basis and benefit levels are uniform across the country. Though bureaucratically organized and administered, they require less and less demeaning effort on the part of beneficiaries in qualifying and maintaining eligibility than do "feminine" programs. They are far less subject to intrusive controls and in most cases lack the dimension of surveillance. They also tend to require less of beneficiaries in the way of benefit-collection efforts, with the notable exception of unemployment insurance. In sum, "masculine" social insurance schemes position recipients primarily as *rights-bearers*. The beneficiaries of these programs are in the main not stigmatized. Neither administrative practice nor popular discourse constitutes them as "on the dole." They are constituted rather as receiving what they deserve, what they, in "partnership" with their employers, have already paid in for, what they, therefore, have a *right* to. Moreover, these beneficiaries are also positioned as *purchasing consumers*. They receive cash as opposed to "in-kind" benefits and so are positioned as having "the liberty to strike the best bargain they can in purchasing services of their choice on the open market." In sum, these beneficiaries are what C.B. MacPherson calls "possessive individuals."<sup>20</sup>

Proprietors of their own persons who have freely contracted to sell their labor-power, they become participants in social insurances and, hence, paying consumers of human services. They therefore qualify as *social citizens* in virtually the fullest sense that term can acquire within the framework of male-dominated capitalist society.

All this stands in stark contrast to the “feminine” sector of the U.S. social-welfare system. This sector consists in relief programs, such as AFDC, food stamps, Medicaid and public housing assistance. These programs are not contributory, but are financed out of general tax revenues, usually with one-third of the funds coming from the federal governments and two-thirds coming from the states. They are not administered nationally but rather by the states. As a result, benefit levels vary dramatically, though they are everywhere inadequate, deliberately pegged below the official poverty line. The relief programs are notorious for the varieties of administrative humiliation they inflict upon clients. They require considerable work in qualifying and maintaining eligibility; and they have a heavy component of surveillance.

These programs do not in any meaningful sense position their subjects as right-bearers. Far from being considered as having a right to what they receive, recipients are defined as “beneficiaries of governmental largesse” or “clients of public charity.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, their actual treatment fails to live up even to that definition, since they are treated as “chiselers”, “deviants” and “human failures.” In the androcentric-administrative framework, “welfare mothers” are considered not to work and so are sometimes required, that is to say coerced, to work off their benefits via “workfare.” They thus become inmates of what Diana Pearce calls a “workhouse without walls.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the only sense in which the category of rights is relevant to these clients’ situation is the somewhat dubious one according to which they are entitled to treatment governed by the standards of formal-bureaucratic procedural rationality. But if that right is construed as protection from administrative caprice, then even it is widely and routinely disregarded. Moreover, recipients of public relief are generally not positioned as purchasing consumers. A significant portion of their benefits is “in-kind” and what cash they get comes already carved up and earmarked for specific, administratively designated purposes. These recipients are therefore essentially *clients*, a subject-position which carries far less power and dignity in capitalist societies than does the alternative position of purchaser. In these societies, to be client in the sense relevant to relief recipients is to be an abject dependent. Indeed, this sense of the term carries connotations of a fall from autonomy, as when we speak, for example, of “the client-states of empires or superpowers.” As clients, then, recipients of relief are *the negatives of possessive individuals*. Largely excluded from the market, both as workers and as consumers, claiming benefits not as individuals

but as members of “failed” families, these recipients are effectively denied the trappings of social citizenship as the latter is defined within male-dominated capitalist societies.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, this system creates a double-bind for women raising children without a male breadwinner. By failing to offer them day care, job training, a job that pays a “family wage” or some combination of these, it constructs them exclusively as mothers. As a consequence, it interprets their needs as maternal needs and their sphere of activity as that of “the family.” Now, according to the ideology of separate spheres, this should be an honorific social identity. Yet the system does not honor these women. On the contrary, instead of providing them a guaranteed income equivalent to a family wage as a matter of right, it stigmatizes, humiliates and harasses them. In effect, it decrees that these women must be, yet cannot be, normative mothers.

Moreover, the way in which the U.S. social-welfare system interprets “maternity” and “the family” is race-and-culture-specific. The bias is made plain in Carol Stack’s study, *All Our Kin*.<sup>23</sup> Stack analyzes domestic arrangements of very poor Black welfare recipients in a mid-western city. Where ideologues see the “disorganization of *the* [sic] black family.” She finds complex, highly organized kinship structures. These include kin-based networks of resource pooling and exchange which enable those in direct poverty to survive economically and communally. The networks organize delayed exchanges of “gifts,” in Mauss’ sense, of prepared meals, food stamps, cooking, shopping, groceries, furniture, sleeping space, cash (including wages and AFDC allowances), transportation, clothing, child care, even children. They span several physically distinct households and so transcend the principal administrative category which organizes relief programs. It is significant that Stack took great pains to conceal the identities of her subjects, even going so far as to disguise the identity of their city. The reason though unstated, is obvious: these people would lose their benefits if program administrators learned that they did not utilize them within the confines and boundaries of a “household.”

We can summarize the separate and unequal character of the two-tiered, gender-liked, race-and culture-biased U.S. social-welfare system in the following formulae: Participants in the “masculine” subsystem are positioned as *rights-bearing beneficiaries and purchasing consumers of services*. Participants in the “feminine” subsystem, on the other hand, are positioned as *dependent clients*.

#### IV

Clearly, the identities and needs which the social-welfare system fashions for its recipients are *interpreted* identities and needs. Moreover,

they are highly political interpretations which are in principle subject to dispute. Yet these needs and identities are not always recognized as interpretations. Too often, they simply go without saving and are rendered immune from analysis and critique.

Doubtless one reason for this "reification effect" is the depth at which gender meanings and norms are embedded in our general culture. But there may also be another reason more specific to the welfare system.

Let me suggest yet another way of analyzing the U.S. social-welfare system, this time as a "juridical-administrative-therapeutic state apparatus" (JAT).<sup>24</sup> The point is to emphasize a distinctive style of operation. *Qua* JAT, the welfare system works by linking together a series of juridical, administrative and therapeutic procedures. As a consequence, it tends to translate political issues concerning the interpretation of people's needs into legal, administrative and/or therapeutic matters. Thus, the system executes political policy in a way which appears nonpolitical and tends to be depoliticizing.

Consider that, at an abstract level, the subject-positions constructed for beneficiaries of *both* the "masculine" and the "feminine" components of the system can be analyzed as combinations of three distinct elements. The first element is a *juridical* one which positions recipients vis-a-vis the legal system by according or denying them various *rights*. Thus, the subject of the "masculine" subsystem has a right to benefits and is protected from some legally sanctioned forms of administrative caprice, while the subject of the "feminine" subsystem largely lacks rights.

This juridical element is then linked with a second one, an *administrative* element. For in order to qualify to receive benefits, subjects must assume the stance of petitioners with respect to an administrative body; they must petition a bureaucratic institution empowered to decide their claims on the basis of administratively defined criteria. In the "masculine" subsystem, for example, claimants must prove their "cases" meet administratively defined criteria of entitlement; in the "feminine" subsystem, on the other hand, they must prove conformity to administratively defined criteria of need. The enormous qualitative differences between the two sets of procedures notwithstanding, both are variations on the same administrative moment. Both require claimants to translate their experienced situations and life-problems into administerable needs, to present the former as bonafide instances of specified generalized states of affairs which could in principle befall anyone.<sup>25</sup>

If and when they qualify, social-welfare claimants get positioned either as purchasing consumers or dependent clients. In either case, their needs are redefined as correlates of bureaucratically administered satisfactions. This means they are quantified, rendered as equivalents of a sum of money.<sup>26</sup> Thus, in the "feminine" subsystem, clients are positioned

passively to receive monetarily measured, predefined and prepacked services; in the “masculine” subsystem, on the other hand, they receive a specified, predetermined amount of cash.

In both subsystems, then, people’s needs are subject to a sort of rewriting operation. Experienced situations and life-problems are translated into administerable needs. And since the latter are not necessarily isomorphic to the former, the possibility of a gap between them arises. This possibility is especially likely in the “feminine” subsystem. For there, as we saw, clients are constructed as deviant and service provision has the character of normalization — albeit normalization designed more to stigmatize than to “reform”.

Here, then, is the opening for the third, *therapeutic* moment of the JAT’s *modus operandi*. Especially in the “feminine” subsystem, service provision often includes an implicit or explicit therapeutic or quasi-therapeutic dimension. In AFDC, for example, social workers concern themselves with the “mental health” aspects of their clients’ lives, often construing these in terms of “character problems.” More explicitly and less moralistically, municipal programs for poor, unmarried, pregnant teenage women include not only pre-natal care, mothering instruction and tutoring or schooling, but also counselling sessions with psychiatric social workers. As observed by Prudence Pains, such sessions are intended to bring girls to acknowledge what are considered to be their true, deep, latent, emotional problems on the assumption that this will enable them to avoid future pregnancies.<sup>27</sup> Ludicrous as this sounds, it is only an extreme example of a more pervasive phenomenon, namely, the tendency of especially “feminine” social-welfare programs to construct gender-political and political-economic problems as individual, psychological problems. In fact, some therapeutic or quasi-therapeutic welfare services can be regarded as second-order services to compensate for the debilitating effects of first-order services. In any case, the therapeutic dimension of the U.S. social-welfare system encourages clients to close gaps between their culturally shaped lived experience and their administratively defined situation by bringing the former into line with the latter,

Clearly, this analysis of the U.S. welfare system as a “juridical-administrative-therapeutic state apparatus” lets us see both subsystems more critically. It suggests that the problem is not only that women are disempowered by the *denial* of social citizenship in the “feminine” subsystem, although they are. It is also that women and men are disempowered by the *realization* of an androcentric, possessive individualist form of social citizenship in the “masculine” subsystem. In *both* subsystems, including the “masculine” one, the JAT positions its subjects in ways which do not empower them. It individualizes them as “cases” and so militates against collective identification. It imposes

monological, administrative definitions of situation and need and so preempts dialogically achieved self-definition and self-determination. It positions its subjects as passive client or consumer recipients and not as active co-participants involved in shaping their life-conditions. Lastly, it construes experienced discontent with these arrangements as material for adjustment-oriented, usually sexist therapy and not as material for empowering processes of consciousness-raising.

All told, then, the form of social citizenship constructed even in the best part of the U.S. social-welfare system is a degraded and depoliticized one. It is a form of passive citizenship in which the state preempts the power to define and satisfy people's needs.

This form of passive citizenship arises in part as a result of the JAT's distinctive style of operation. The JAT treats the interpretation of people's needs as pregiven and unproblematic, while itself redefining them as amenable to system-conforming satisfactions. Thus, the JAT shifts attention away from the question: Who interprets social needs and how? It tends to substitute the *juridical, administrative and therapeutic management of need satisfaction* for the *politics of need interpretation*. That is, it tends to substitute *monological, administrative processes of need definition* for *dialogical, participatory processes of need interpretation*.<sup>28</sup>

## V

Usually, analyses of social complexes as "institutionalized patterns of interpretation" are implicitly or explicitly functionalist. They purport to show how culturally hegemonic systems of meanings are stabilized and reproduced over time. As a result, such analyses often screen out "dysfunctional" events like micro and macropolitical resistances and conflicts. More generally, they tend to obscure the active side of social processes, the ways in which even the most routinized practice of social agents involves the active construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of social meanings. It is no wonder, then, that many feminist scholars have become suspicious of functionalist methodologies; for, when applied to gender issues, these methods occlude female agency and construe women as mere passive victims of male dominance.

In order to avoid any such suggestion here, I want to conclude by situating the foregoing analysis in a broader, nonfunctionalist perspective. I want to sketch a picture according to which the social-welfare apparatus is one agent among others in a larger and highly contested political arena.

Consider that the ideological (as opposed to economic) effects of the JAT's mode of need interpretation operate within a specific and relatively new societal arena. I call this arena "the social" in order to mark its



noncoincidence with the familiar institutionalized spaces of family and official-economy. In addition, the social is not exactly equivalent to the traditional public sphere of political discourse defined by Juergen Habermas; nor is it coextensive with the state. Rather, the social is a site of discourse about people's needs, specifically about those needs which have broken out of the domestic and/or official-economic spheres that earlier contained them as "private matters." Thus, the social is a site of discourse about problematical needs, needs which have come to exceed the apparently (but not really) self-regulating domestic and economic institutions of male-dominated, capitalist society.<sup>29</sup>

As the site of this excess, the social is by definition a terrain of contestation. It is a space in which conflicts among rival interpretations of people's needs are played out. "In" the social, then, one would expect to find a plurality of competing needs discourses. And in fact what we do find here are at least three major kinds: 1) "expert" needs discourses of, for example, social workers and therapists, on the one hand, and welfare administrators, planners and policy makers, on the other; 2) oppositional movement needs discourses of, for example, feminists, lesbians and gays, people of color, workers and welfare clients; and 3) "reprivatization" discourses of constituencies seeking to repatriate newly problematized needs to their former domestic or official-economic enclaves. Such discourses, and others, compete with one another in addressing the fractured social identities of potential adherents.

Seen from this vantage point, the social has a two-fold character. It is simultaneously a new arena of state activity and, equally important, a new terrain of wider political contestation. It is both the home turf of the JAT and also a field of struggle which the JAT does not simply control, but on which it acts as one contestant among others.

It would be a mistake, then, to treat the JAT as the undisputed master of the terrain of the social. In fact, much of the growth and activity of the social branch of the state has come in response to the activities of social movements, especially the labor, Black, feminist and Progressive movements. Moreover, as Theda Skocpol has shown, the social state is not simply a unified, self-possessed political *agent*.<sup>30</sup> It is rather in significant respects a *resultant*, a complex and polyvalent nexus of compromise-formations in which are sedimented the outcomes of past struggles as well as the conditions for present and future ones. In fact, even when the JAT does act as an agent, the results are often unintended. When it takes responsibility for matters previously left to the family and/or economy, it tends to denaturalize those matters and thus risks fostering their future politicization.<sup>31</sup>

In any case, social movements, too, act on the terrain of the social (as do, on a smaller scale, clients who engage the JAT in micropolitical resistances and negotiations). In fact, the JAT's monological,



administrative approach to need definition can also be seen as a strategy to contain social movements. Such movements tend, by their very nature, to be dialogic and participatory. They represent the emergent capacities of newly politicized groups to cast off the apparently natural and prepolitical interpretations which enveloped their needs in the official-economy and/or family. In social movements, people come to articulate alternative, politicized interpretations of their needs as they engage in processes of dialogue and collective struggle. Thus, the confrontation of such movements with the JAT on the terrain of the social is a confrontation between *conflicting logics of need definition*.

Feminists, too, then, are actors on the terrain of the social. Indeed, from this perspective, we can distinguish several analytically distinct, but practically intermingled kinds of feminist struggles worth engaging in the coming welfare wars. First, there are struggles to secure the political status of women's needs, that is, to legitimate women's needs as genuine political issues as opposed to "private" domestic or market matters. Here, feminists would engage especially anti-welfarist defenders of privatization. Second, there are struggles over the interpreted content of women's needs, struggles to challenge the apparently natural, traditional interpretations still enveloping needs only recently sprung from domestic and official-economic enclaves of privacy. Here, feminists would engage all those forces in the culture which perpetuates androcentric and sexist interpretations of women's needs, including, but not only, the social state. Third, there are struggles over the who and how of need interpretation, struggles to empower women to interpret their own needs and to challenge the anti-participatory, monological practices of the welfare system *qua* JAT. Fourth, there are struggles to elaborate and win support for policies based on feminist interpretations of women's needs, policies which avoid both the Scylla of private patriarchy and the Charybdis of public patriarchy.

In all these cases, the focus would be as much on need interpretation as on need satisfaction. And this is as it should be, since any satisfactions we are lucky enough to win will be problematic to the degree we fail to fight and win the battle of interpretation.

#### NOTES

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1. O'Connor, *The Fiscal Crisis of the State* New York: St Martin's Press 1973.
2. Pearce, "Women, work, and welfare: The Feminization of Poverty" *Working women and Families* Feinsein (ed) Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications 1979.
3. Ebreinreich, B. and Piven, F. "The Feminisation of Poverty" *Dissent* Spring 1984 pp162:70.
4. Pearce, D. op cit; Barrett, N. "The Welfare Trap" Unpublished Manuscript 1984 and Erie, S; Rein, M. and Wiget, B. "Women and the Reagan Revolution: Thermidor for the Social Welfare Economy". *Families, Politics and Public Policies: A Feminist Dialogue on Women and The State* Diamond (ed) New York and London: Longmen 1983.
5. Brown, C. "Mothers, Fathers, and Children: From Private to Public Patriarchy" *Women and Revolution* Sargent, L. (ed) Boston: South End Press 1981 I believe that Brown's terms are too simple on two counts. First, for reasons elaborated by Gayte Rubin (see "The Traffic in Woman: Notes on the "Political Economy" of sex" *Towards an Anthropology of Women* Reiter (ed) New York Monthly Review Press 1975. I prefer not to use 'patriarchy' as a generic term for male dominance but rather as the specific historical *social formation*. Second, Brown's public/private contrast oversimplifies the structure of both laissez-faire and welfare capitalism, since it posits two major societal zones where there are actually four (family, official-economy, state, and sphere of public political discourse) and conflates two distinct public-private divisions. These problems notwithstanding, it remains the case that Brown's terms are immensely suggestive and that we currently have no better terminology. Thus, in what follows I occasionally use 'public patriarchy' for want of an alternative.
6. For an analysis of the dynamics whereby Late-capitalist political systems tend to select certain types of interests while excluding others, see Offe, *Political Authority and Class Structure: An Analysis of Capitalist Societies. International Journal of Sociology.* 2: 73-10. 1972; Offe, *Structural Problems of the Capitalist State: Class Rule and the Political System. On the Selectiveness of Political Intitutions.* In *German Political Studies.* Klaus von Beyme, ed. London: Sage Publications. 1974; Offe, *The Separation of Form and Content in Liberal Democratic Politics. Studies in Political Economy,* 3: 5-16. 1980.
7. This phrase owes its inspiration to Habermas J., *Legitimation Crisis* Boston Beacon 1975.
8. I owe this phrase to Thomas McCarthy (personal communication).
9. See Erie, Rein and Wiget, "Women and the Reagan Revolution: Thermidor for the Social Welfare Economy" *Families, Politics, and Public Policies: A*


*Feminist Dialogue on Women and The State* Diamond ed. New York & London Longman 1983.

10. Nelson, B. "Women's Poverty and Women's Citizenship: Some Political Consequences of Economic Maginality" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 10: 209-231 1980.
11. See *ibid.*
12. See *Erie et al ibid.*
13. See *ibid.*
14. Ehrenreich and Fox Piven "The Feminsation of Poverty" *Dissent* Spring 1984: p162-170.
15. Land, H. "Who cares For The Family?" *Journal of Social Policy* 7: 257-284 1978.
16. I owe the phrase "gender subtext" to Smith, D. "The Gender Subtext of Power" Unpublished Manuscript 1984.
17. Hilary Land identifies similar assumptions at work in the British social-welfare system. My formulation of them is much indebted to her. See Land, H. "Who Cares For The Family?" *Journal of Social Policy* 7: 257-284 1978.
18. Pearce, D. "Women Work and Welfare The Feminisation of Poverty" *op cit.*
19. Nelson, B., "Women's Poverty and Women's Citizenship" *op cit.*
20. MacPherson, C.B. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* New York and London: Oxford Uni. Press 1964.
21. Pearce, D., "Women, Work and Welfare: The Feminisation of Poverty" *op cit.*
22. It should be noted that I am here taking issue with the assumption that "decommodification" in the form of in kind social-welfare benefits represents an emancipatory or progressive development. In the context of a two-tiered welfare system like the one described here, this assumption is clearly false, since in kind benefits are qualitatively and quantitatively inferior to the corresponding commodities and since they function to stigmatize those who receive them.
23. Stack C., *All Our Kin: Strategies For Survival in a Black Community* New York Harper and Row 1974.

24. This term echoes Louis Althusser's term, 'ideological state apparatus.' Certainly, the U.S. social-welfare system as described in the present section of this paper counts as an "ISA" in Althusser's sense. However, I prefer the term 'juridical-administrative-therapeutic state apparatus' as more concrete and descriptive of the specific ways in which welfare programs produce and reproduce ideology. In general, then, a JAT can be understood as a subclass of an ISA. On the other hand, Althusserian-like terminology aside, readers will find that the account in this section owes more to Michael Foucault and Juergen Habermas than to Althusser. Of course, neither Habermas nor Foucault is sensitive to the gendered character of social-welfare programs.
  
25. Habermas J., *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns*, Band 11, *Zur Kritik der Funktionalistischen Vernunft* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1981.
  
26. See *ibid.*
  
27. Rains, P.H., *Becoming an Unwed Mother: A Sociological Account* Chicago: Aldine Athertar 1971.
  
28. These formulations owe much to Habermas.
  
29. I borrow the term 'social' from Hannah Arendt. However, my use of it differs from hers in several important ways. First, Arendt and I both understand the social as an historically emergent societal space specific to modernity. And we both understand the emergence of the social as tending to undercut or blur an earlier, more distinct separation of public and private spheres. But she treats the emergence of the social as a fall or lapse and she valorizes the earlier separation of public and private as a preferred state of affairs appropriate to "the human condition." I, on the other hand, make no assumptions about the human conditions; nor do I regret the passing of the private/public separation; nor do I consider the emergence of the social a fall or lapse. Secondly, Arendt and I agree that one salient, defining feature of the social is the emergence of heretofore "private" needs into public view. But Arendt treats this as a violation of the proper order of things. She assumes that needs are wholly natural and are forever doomed to be things of brute compulsion. Thus, she supposes needs can have no genuinely political dimension and that their emergence from the private sphere into the social spells the death of authentic politics. I, on the other hand, assume that needs are irreducibly interpretive and that need interpretations are in principle contestable. It follows from my view that the emergence of needs from the "private" into the social is a generally positive development since such needs thereby lose their illusory aura of naturalness, while their interpretations become subject to critique and contestation. I, therefore, suppose that this represents the (possible) flourishing of politics, rather than the (necessary) death of politics. Finally, Arendt assumes that the emergence of the social and of public concern with needs necessarily means the triumph of administration and instrumental reason. I, on the other hand, assume that

instrumental reason represents only one possible way of defining and addressing social needs; and that administration represents only one possible way of institutionalizing the social. Thus, I would argue for the existence of another possibility: an alternative "dialogic" feminist "logic of need interpretation" and a participatory institutionalization of the social.

30. Skocpol, T., "Political Response to Capitalist Crisis: Neo-Marxist Theories of the State and the Case of the New Deal" *Politics and Society* 10 1980 p155-201.



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