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The Political Definition of Needs: Power, Voice, and Epistemic Authority

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Article

Keywords: human needs, politics of needs, Critical Theory, power, voice, epistemic authority

Posted Date: November 6th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11283928/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This article develops an account of the political dimension of human needs starting from the idea that needs possess a socially mediated objectivity. Their non-satisfaction causes objective harm, but their interpretation and satisfaction take place within historically specific social relations and institutions. Building on Nancy Fraser's account of the politics of need interpretation, the article argues that power operates at three interconnected levels: the interpretation of needs, the selection of satisfiers, and the organization of modes of access to them. It then examines the epistemic and political roles of voice, advocacy, and contestation in challenging unequal distributions of interpretive and institutional authority. Through three problematic constellations concerning cultural belonging, competing social ontologies, and childhood vaccination, the article explores what happens when the claims of those affected conflict with knowledge about the harms produced by particular satisfiers or their absence. It argues that political standing should not be confused with epistemic authority, while epistemic authority does not itself confer political authority. Objective harm can constrain politically defensible responses without providing a universally applicable normative criterion for resolving conflicts over needs.

1. What is Political about Human Needs?

Needs occupy an ambiguous position in political philosophy. On the one hand, they seem to possess a degree of objectivity that distinguishes them from desires, preferences, and interests. We may desire things that we do not need, and we may need things that we do not desire or even recognize as necessary. The non-satisfaction of certain needs causes harm independently of our subjective attitudes toward them.[1] On the other hand, human needs cannot simply be derived from our biological constitution. They arise, are interpreted, and are satisfied within historically specific forms of social life. Human beings need nourishment, but what counts as adequate nourishment, which foods are considered appropriate, and how access to them is socially organized vary considerably across societies. The same is even more evident in the case of needs related to education, communication, mobility, recognition, or social participation. This raises a question that has received comparatively little attention in philosophical theories of needs: what exactly is *political* about human needs? The question is not simply whether political institutions should guarantee the satisfaction of certain fundamental needs. Nor is it only a question of how scarce resources should be distributed among competing needs. Before these distributive questions arise, political decisions and social relations already shape the processes through which needs are identified and interpreted, through which certain means are recognized as appropriate for satisfying them, and through which access to these means is institutionally organized.

In this paper, I argue that the political dimension of needs becomes visible once we abandon the alternative between understanding needs as either objective natural facts or subjective preferences. Needs can be objective without being pre-social. Their objectivity is socially mediated: their non-satisfaction causes real harm to individuals' capacity to exist, function, and develop, but the functions individuals are expected to perform and the socially adequate conditions for performing them are

themselves historically and institutionally shaped. This socially mediated character of needs does not imply that their validity is simply determined by political decisions or collective preferences. A political community cannot decide that individuals do not need nourishment, physical security, or the conditions required to participate in social life without suffering harm. Yet considerable room for interpretation and conflict remains concerning how particular needs manifest themselves, which means are appropriate for satisfying them, and how access to these means should be organized. It is within this space between objective harm and socially mediated interpretation that the politics of needs emerges.

The argument developed here builds on the tradition of Critical Theory and, more specifically, on Nancy Fraser's account of the "politics of need interpretation." Fraser's analysis draws attention to the struggles through which needs acquire publicly recognized interpretations and to the unequal relations of power within which these struggles take place. I propose to extend this perspective by distinguishing three interconnected objects of political conflict: the interpretation of needs, the selection of satisfiers, and the organization of modes of access to them. Power operates at each of these levels, determining not only which needs become publicly recognizable but also which means of satisfaction are regarded as legitimate or feasible and under which institutional conditions individuals can obtain them. This expanded conception of the politics of needs also raises the question of what role should be attributed to those whose needs are at stake. I argue that the validity of a need does not depend on its participatory recognition. Voice, advocacy, and contestation instead perform distinct but connected epistemic and political functions by introducing experiences and interpretations that may otherwise remain unheard, representing claims that cannot effectively be articulated by those directly concerned, and challenging established interpretations, satisfiers, and modes of access. None of these practices, however, provides an alternative source of final authority over the definition and satisfaction of needs. The final part of the article examines the conflicts that arise once this limitation is taken seriously. The political standing of those affected cannot be equated with epistemic authority, but neither does relevant expertise by itself confer political authority to determine how needs should be interpreted and satisfied. This tension becomes particularly visible when socially articulated interpretations of needs conflict with knowledge about the objective harms produced by particular satisfiers or by their absence. I argue that objective harm can constrain the range of politically defensible interpretations and responses without supplying a universally applicable normative criterion capable of determining the correct outcome of every conflict. The political definition of needs does not resolve the tension between voice, knowledge, and power; it is one of the fields in which that tension becomes politically consequential.

2. The Social Objectivity of Needs

I shall start from a minimal definition. Human needs concern conditions whose absence or insufficient satisfaction causes objective harm to individuals' capacity to exist, to perform physical, psychological, and social functions, and to develop the capacities required to exercise those functions. In this respect, needs differ fundamentally from desires and preferences. We may fail to obtain something we desire without suffering any relevant harm, whereas the non-satisfaction of a need affects our capacity to function as persons within a given social world.

The reference to objective harm should not, however, be understood as reducing needs to biological necessities. Human beings are biological organisms, and some of their needs obviously have a biological basis. Yet human beings are also social beings whose capacities can be developed and exercised only within historically specific forms of social life. Consequently, the functions whose impairment constitutes harm are not exclusively biological. They include functions that arise from the social positions, relationships, practices, and institutions in which individuals participate. Consider the apparently elementary case of nutrition. Human beings need nourishment for biological reasons, but this tells us remarkably little about what adequate satisfaction of this need requires. People do not consume abstract quantities of calories and nutrients; they eat socially recognizable foods, prepared and consumed according to practices that vary historically and culturally. Moreover, adequate nutrition in a given society may require access to a variety, quality, and mode of consumption that allows individuals not merely to survive biologically but to participate in social life without shame or exclusion. The biological basis of the need therefore underdetermines its socially adequate satisfaction.

This becomes still clearer with needs whose social mediation is more immediately visible. Access to digital communication, for example, was not a human need in previous historical societies. In contemporary societies, however, the capacity to communicate digitally may become necessary for finding employment, accessing public services, maintaining social relations, receiving education, or exercising political rights. Similarly, the forms of mobility individuals need depend partly on how housing, employment, education, and public services are spatially organized. Social arrangements therefore do not merely provide different means for satisfying independently given needs. They also contribute to determining the functions individuals must be able to perform and, consequently, the conditions they objectively need in order to function without suffering avoidable harm. The objectivity of human needs is thus neither purely natural nor merely subjective. It is a socially mediated objectivity. Needs are objective insofar as their non-satisfaction produces harm independently of whether individuals happen to desire their satisfaction or even recognize the need itself. But what counts as adequate functioning, which capacities individuals must develop, and which conditions are necessary for exercising them depend partly on historically specific social relations and institutions.

This point has an important consequence. If needs are socially mediated, their identification cannot be conceived as a purely technical operation performed by external experts who simply discover facts about human beings. At the same time, it cannot be reduced to the aggregation of subjective preferences or to whatever individuals or communities happen to declare that they need. The interpretation of needs takes place between these two poles: it is constrained by the reality of harm while remaining dependent on knowledge of the social practices, expectations, and institutional conditions within which that harm arises. It is precisely here that the political dimension of needs begins to emerge.

3. The Politics of Needs: Interpretation, Satisfiers, and Access

If needs are socially mediated, their interpretation is inevitably embedded in relations of power. This does not mean that political power can arbitrarily determine what individuals need. The reality of harm constrains legitimate interpretations of needs. Yet between the existence of a harm and the institutional response to it lies a complex process in which some interpretations are recognized as authoritative while others are ignored, marginalized, or rendered unintelligible. The question of needs is therefore political not only because their satisfaction requires the allocation of resources, but because actors possess unequal capacities to define what counts as a relevant need, how it should be understood, and what should be done about it.

Nancy Fraser captured this point in her account of the "politics of need interpretation" (Fraser, 2013, 53 ff.).[2] Needs do not enter the political sphere already equipped with an uncontested meaning. Social actors struggle over whether a condition should be recognized as a need at all, over how that need should be interpreted, and over which institutions should assume responsibility for addressing it. Such struggles take place under unequal conditions. Governments, experts, markets, social movements, families, and the individuals directly concerned do not possess the same resources or the same authority to impose their interpretations. Some interpretations become institutionalized and acquire the appearance of neutrality, while others remain politically marginal.

The politics of needs, however, does not end with their recognition and interpretation. Even where there is broad agreement that a need exists, disagreement may persist over its appropriate *satisfiers*, that is, the means through which the need can be adequately satisfied. A need for mobility, for instance, may be addressed through private automobiles, public transportation, changes in urban organization, or a combination of these. A need for care may be satisfied through unpaid family work, public services, market provision, or community arrangements. These alternatives are not functionally or politically equivalent. They distribute costs and responsibilities differently and generate different relations of dependence, autonomy, and power. The selection of satisfiers is therefore itself a political process. Institutions do not simply respond to independently given needs by providing technically optimal means of satisfaction. They privilege particular satisfiers, exclude others, and in doing so shape social practices and relations. A society that treats care primarily as a family responsibility, for example, organizes both the satisfaction of the need for care and the distribution of the burdens associated with it differently from a society that treats care as a public responsibility. Similarly, treating access to housing primarily as a market relation rather than as a matter of public provision does more than identify a different instrument for satisfying the same need: it places individuals in a different relation to markets, public institutions, and one another (Bourdieu, 2005).

A third political dimension concerns what I shall call *modes of access*: the institutional arrangements through which individuals obtain the satisfiers they need. The same satisfier may be available as a social right, as a commodity purchased on the market, as a benefit conditional on eligibility criteria, through family membership, or as an act of charity. These modes of access can make an important difference even when the material good or service ultimately obtained is identical. They determine who must demonstrate eligibility, who bears the burden of providing information, who exercises discretion, whether

access is secure or revocable, and whether individuals encounter institutions as rights-bearing members, clients, dependants, or supplicants.

The politics of needs therefore operates at several interconnected levels. Power affects which experiences of harm become publicly recognizable as needs; it shapes the interpretation of those needs; it influences which satisfiers are treated as legitimate or feasible; and it structures the conditions under which individuals gain access to them. In each case, power is exercised not only through explicit political decisions but also through institutional routines, professional knowledge, dominant social norms, and established distributions of resources and authority. This also means that the successful functioning of an institutional arrangement cannot by itself settle the question of its legitimacy. Social orders may reproduce themselves effectively while excluding entire groups from the interpretation of their own needs or assigning them satisfiers and modes of access that reinforce relations of dependency and subordination. The relevant question is therefore not merely whether needs are in some sense being satisfied, but whose interpretation of them prevails, whose experiences and knowledge count, and what possibilities exist for challenging established interpretations and arrangements.

This brings us to a further dimension of the politics of needs. If the capacity to interpret needs and organize their satisfaction is unequally distributed, what role should be attributed to the voice of those whose needs are at stake? Answering this question does not require assuming from the outset that every decision concerning needs must be made through participatory procedures. It does, however, require examining the possibilities individuals and groups possess to articulate their own experiences, to have their claims represented when they cannot do so effectively themselves, and to contest interpretations, satisfiers, and modes of access imposed or established by more powerful actors.

4. Voice, Advocacy, and Contestation

The most immediate reason for taking the voice of those whose needs are at stake seriously is epistemic. If needs are socially mediated, understanding them requires knowledge of the social circumstances in which individuals live and of the ways in which particular arrangements affect their capacity to function. Experts may possess indispensable medical, economic, legal, or administrative knowledge, but this does not give them privileged access to every relevant dimension of a need. Those who experience a situation may have epistemic access to dimensions of it that are easily overlooked from an external perspective:[3] they know how institutional rules operate in everyday life, which obstacles prevent access to available satisfiers, which forms of provision are experienced as stigmatizing or humiliating, and which apparently adequate solutions fail to address the harm they actually experience.

This does not mean that first-person claims about needs are necessarily correct or normatively authoritative. Individuals may misinterpret their own situation, adapt their expectations to deprivation,[4] internalize dominant interpretations, or fail to identify the social mechanisms responsible for the harms they experience. The point is therefore not to replace expert knowledge with subjective testimony, but to recognize that the interpretation of socially mediated needs requires a plurality of epistemic

perspectives. *Voice* matters because excluding the knowledge of those affected makes the interpretation of needs systematically more vulnerable to distortion and incompleteness. Yet voice is not simply a source of information for decision-makers. If individuals are invited to describe their experiences while others retain exclusive authority to determine what those experiences mean and what should be done about them, voice can easily be reduced to consultation without influence. The political significance of voice lies also in the possibility of introducing interpretations into public and institutional arenas that challenge established understandings of needs. In this sense, voice concerns not merely the transmission of information but the capacity to formulate claims and to demand that they be taken into account. The ability to exercise such voice is, however, itself unequally distributed. Individuals and groups differ in their access to public institutions, organizational resources, education, recognized forms of expertise, and the linguistic and conceptual resources required to formulate claims in institutionally intelligible ways. Some may also be prevented from speaking effectively by relations of dependency, fear of sanctions, social stigma, or the absence of channels through which their claims can reach decision-makers. A politics of needs must therefore consider not only whether those affected are formally allowed to speak, but also whether their claims can become socially and politically audible.

This is one reason why *advocacy* can play an important role. Social movements, associations, professionals, researchers, and other actors may help articulate claims that would otherwise remain unheard, translate claims and experiences into languages recognized by institutions, or provide organizational resources to groups with little direct political influence. Advocacy can thus correct, at least partially, asymmetries in the capacity to make needs visible, while also introducing a further layer of interpretation and representation. At the same time, it creates a familiar problem of representation: advocates may misrepresent those for whom they claim to speak, substitute their own interpretation of needs for that of the persons concerned, or acquire an authority that those persons themselves do not possess. Advocacy therefore cannot simply replace voice. Its political value depends partly on its continuing responsiveness to the experiences and claims of those whose needs it seeks to represent.[5]

Neither voice nor advocacy, moreover, guarantees that established interpretations or institutional arrangements can actually be challenged. For this reason, a further element becomes important: *contestation*. By contestation I mean the possibility of questioning authoritative interpretations of needs, challenging the selection of satisfiers, and objecting to the modes of access through which those satisfiers are provided. Contestation is less demanding than a general right to co-decide every question concerning the satisfaction of needs. It does not imply that those affected must possess final decision-making authority, nor that expert knowledge or public institutions lose their legitimate roles. It requires, more minimally, that institutionalized interpretations and arrangements not be insulated from challenge by those who are subject to their consequences. The importance of contestation becomes particularly clear when needs are formally recognized and satisfiers are actually provided. In such cases, injustice or domination may not take the form of outright deprivation. It may arise instead from the way in which a need is interpreted or access is organized. A welfare benefit may secure material subsistence while subjecting recipients to intrusive monitoring; a care arrangement may meet physical needs while producing relations of extreme dependency; a public service may be formally available while its

administrative procedures expose users to humiliation or arbitrary discretion. The possibility of contesting such arrangements allows those affected to challenge not only whether their needs are being satisfied, but how they are being satisfied and under which relations of power.

This suggests a conception of the political dimension of needs that does not depend on the stronger claim that all those affected must participate directly in every decision concerning them. Historically and contemporarily, many social orders have functioned while granting only limited political participation to large parts of their populations. Their capacity to function, however, tells us little about the legitimacy of the distributions of interpretive and institutional power on which they rely. What matters for the present argument is the more basic possibility that individuals and groups can make their experiences and claims visible, find forms of representation when necessary, and challenge interpretations and arrangements that affect the satisfaction of their needs.

Voice, advocacy, and contestation should therefore be understood as distinct but connected responses to asymmetries of power in the politics of needs. Voice introduces the perspective of those affected; advocacy can amplify or represent claims that would otherwise remain politically weak; contestation keeps authoritative interpretations, satisfiers, and modes of access open to challenge. None of these mechanisms eliminates conflict or guarantees correct outcomes. Their importance lies rather in preventing the power to interpret and organize the satisfaction of needs from becoming the exclusive prerogative of actors who are institutionally, socially, or epistemically dominant.

5. Conflicts within the Politics of Needs

Taking the political dimension of needs seriously means accepting that no single normative criterion can determine in advance which interpretation of a need, which satisfier, or which mode of access ought to prevail in every conflict. This does not make criticism impossible; it makes it political.

This claim may appear to lead to an uncomfortable conclusion. If needs are socially mediated, if their interpretation cannot be monopolized by experts, and if those whose needs are at stake must be able to voice their own interpretations and challenge established ones, it may seem difficult to explain why some claims concerning needs or their satisfiers should nevertheless be rejected. Yet taking voice seriously cannot mean treating every interpretation voiced by the persons concerned as equally adequate, just as recognizing the possibility of contestation cannot imply that every claim advanced through contestation must be accepted. Nor can advocacy be assumed to provide an external solution to such conflicts, since advocates themselves interpret needs and may disagree both with those they seek to represent and with other actors claiming to speak on their behalf. The difficulty is not an accidental complication that could be eliminated by finding a sufficiently refined normative principle. It follows from the political character of needs itself. Conflicts may concern the identification of a need, its interpretation, the satisfiers regarded as appropriate, or the modes through which access to those satisfiers is organized. They may involve different forms of knowledge, competing social ontologies, conflicting needs of the same person, or the needs of different persons and groups. Moreover, voice,

advocacy, and contestation do not appear in practice as neatly separated mechanisms. The same actor may voice an interpretation of a need, claim to speak on behalf of others, and contest an institutional arrangement, while other affected actors may advance incompatible claims.

The following cases are therefore not intended to identify general rules for resolving such conflicts. Their purpose is rather to examine some constellations in which voice, advocacy, and contestation reveal both their political importance and their *limits*. They also show why acknowledging these limits need not entail either abandoning the possibility of criticism or reinstating an external normative standpoint from which the correct interpretation of needs and their appropriate satisfiers could supposedly be determined in advance.

A first difficulty arises when the persons whose needs are at stake voice interpretations that we have reasons not to accept. Consider the case discussed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in his novel *The River Between* (Ngũgĩ 2002). Muthoni, the daughter of a Christian convert, decides to undergo female circumcision as part of the initiation ritual of her community. Her decision is particularly significant because she is not simply being forced to submit to the practice. Other girls in the community do not undergo circumcision, and Muthoni knows that her decision will bring her into conflict with her Christian father. She nevertheless regards the ritual as necessary for becoming a full member of her community. In the vocabulary adopted here, she voices a need for belonging and identifies circumcision as an appropriate satisfier of that need. At the same time, however, the practice threatens other needs of hers, most obviously those connected with bodily integrity and a fulfilling sexual life.

The case creates a difficulty for any straightforward appeal to voice. If Muthoni's own interpretation is to be taken seriously, we cannot simply dismiss it as the product of ignorance or external coercion and substitute for it an allegedly more adequate interpretation of what she really needs. But taking her voice seriously cannot require us to accept the satisfier she identifies as appropriate. The distinction between these two claims is crucial. Recognizing the epistemic and political significance of voice means acknowledging the standing of those concerned to articulate their own needs and their interpretation of them; it does not grant them epistemic sovereignty over either the definition of those needs or the identification of their satisfiers. Nor does the problem reduce to a conflict between an individual and a homogeneous cultural community. In Ngũgĩ's novel, the community itself does not speak with one voice. Muthoni's sister does not undergo circumcision and is not thereby excluded from the community. The alleged connection between circumcision and belonging is therefore itself open to disagreement within the form of life in which it has acquired its meaning. What might initially appear as a conflict between an external normative standpoint and a culturally specific interpretation of a need can thus also be understood as a conflict over which satisfiers are actually necessary for satisfying a need whose existence is not in dispute.

This does not by itself solve the problem. One could argue that circumcision does function as a satisfier of Muthoni's need for belonging while simultaneously damaging the conditions for satisfying other needs. A satisfier need not be beneficial in every respect in order to perform its social function. The

relevant question would then no longer be whether circumcision is “really” a satisfier, but whether the satisfaction of one need can justify a practice that seriously compromises others. Nothing in the concept of voice provides an answer to that question. The example therefore reveals both the importance and the limit of voice. Excluding Muthoni’s own interpretation would reproduce precisely the asymmetry that a politics of needs should make visible: outsiders would claim the authority to determine what her needs are and which aspects of her social world matter for their satisfaction. Yet accepting her interpretation as authoritative would merely reverse the problem, transforming first-person experience into a criterion capable of settling conflicts among needs and satisfiers. Voice prevents the interpretation of needs from being monopolized by others; it does not determine which interpretation should ultimately prevail.

An even more difficult constellation arises when voice expresses not merely a different interpretation of a need or a preference for a different satisfier, but a different understanding of the social and natural world within which needs and satisfiers acquire their meaning. This may occur, for instance, when indigenous or traditional communities interpret certain events and the appropriate responses to them through ontologies that differ substantially from those presupposed by public institutions.

Consider a hypothetical community affected by a prolonged drought. Public authorities may identify a need for a secure water supply and propose the construction of reservoirs or other forms of water infrastructure as appropriate satisfiers. Members of the community, however, may understand the drought within a cosmology according to which restoring a disrupted relationship with spiritual or natural entities requires the performance of particular rituals, and may therefore request public resources for the construction of a ceremonial site necessary for performing them. Their claim need not take the form of contestation. They may not challenge the authority of the state or oppose the construction of water infrastructure. They may simply voice their own interpretation of the situation and identify as a satisfier something that, from the standpoint of public authorities, does not satisfy the relevant need at all.[6] The problem here differs from the case of Muthoni. It cannot be described simply as a disagreement about which among several possible satisfiers should be used to satisfy an independently identified need. What is at stake is partly the conceptual framework within which something can count as a satisfier in the first place. From the standpoint of the public administration, a ritual cannot secure a water supply because there is no causal relation between performing the ritual and producing or preserving water. From the standpoint of the community, however, this description may already presuppose precisely the separation between natural processes, social practices, and spiritual relations that its own ontology rejects.

Once again, taking voice seriously does not tell us what should be done. Public authorities could reject the request and finance only water infrastructure. They could finance both the infrastructure and the ceremonial site. Or they could reinterpret the latter as a satisfier of a different need—for cultural continuity, collective identity, or religious practice—while denying that it can satisfy the need for water security. Yet none of these responses is politically neutral. The first privileges one ontology in determining what can count as an effective satisfier. The second avoids choosing between the two

claims at the practical level but does not resolve their incompatibility. The third appears more accommodating, but does so by translating the community's own interpretation into categories that the public authority considers intelligible: what the community understands as a practice affecting its relationship with the natural world is redescribed as the satisfaction of a cultural or religious need. The example therefore reveals a further limit of voice. The problem is not always that the persons concerned are mistaken about their needs, lack relevant information, or have adapted their preferences to oppressive circumstances. They may articulate a coherent interpretation grounded in a social ontology that the institutions responsible for providing satisfiers do not share. In such cases, listening more carefully does not dissolve the disagreement. On the contrary, successful voicing may make its depth more visible. This creates a dilemma for a political theory of needs. If public institutions simply impose their own criteria for distinguishing genuine from ineffective satisfiers, voice risks becoming merely consultative: those concerned are permitted to speak, but the conceptual framework within which their claims are assessed remains beyond their influence. Yet if every claimed satisfier must be accepted whenever it is intelligible within the social ontology of those advancing it, the possibility of critically assessing satisfiers seems to disappear. The recognition of ontological plurality therefore does not provide a solution to conflicts over needs. It identifies another dimension in which such conflicts are genuinely political.

A different constellation emerges when those who voice a claim concerning needs do so not only for themselves but also on behalf of others. Debates over mandatory childhood vaccination provide a particularly clear example. Parents who oppose vaccination may object to a public policy that affects them directly, but they typically also claim to be acting in the interests of their children. Their intervention therefore combines voice with advocacy: they articulate their own objections to state interference while simultaneously claiming to identify what their children need and which satisfiers are appropriate for those needs. This immediately complicates the appeal to voice. Young children cannot themselves articulate an informed interpretation of their health needs, so some form of advocacy is unavoidable. Parents ordinarily perform this role, and there are obvious reasons for granting considerable weight to their understanding of their children's interests. Yet they are not the only actors who may claim to speak on the child's behalf. Physicians, public health institutions, and ultimately the state may maintain that vaccination is necessary to protect needs related to the child's health and bodily integrity. The disagreement is therefore not between an institutional authority and an affected individual capable of speaking for herself, as it might initially appear, but between different actors claiming authority to interpret the needs of a third party. The case illustrates a basic difficulty of advocacy. The fact that advocacy is necessary does not by itself establish who is entitled to speak on behalf of those unable to speak for themselves. Parents may ordinarily be the persons closest to their children and most familiar with their circumstances, but this does not necessarily give them final authority when their interpretation of their children's needs conflicts with that of other actors claiming to speak on the children's behalf. Parents may understand themselves as protecting their children from a harmful medical intervention, while medical professionals and public institutions may understand the refusal of vaccination as

exposing those same children to preventable harm. Both sides can thus present their position in the grammar of needs and claim to act on behalf of the same persons.

The constellation becomes still more complex because the relevant needs are not limited to those of the individual child. Decisions concerning vaccination may affect other persons who are exposed to the consequences of lower levels of immunization. The set of those affected therefore extends beyond the persons whose voices are most immediately audible in the political dispute. A claim voiced by one group may conflict with needs attributed to others who are absent from the controversy, unable to participate in it, or represented by different advocates. The category of “those affected” consequently cannot itself provide an unambiguous standpoint from which the conflict can be resolved.

Mandatory vaccination adds yet another dimension, since opposition to it does not merely voice an alternative interpretation of needs. It contests an interpretation that has already been institutionalized and backed by public authority. Parents who oppose compulsory vaccination challenge both the identification of vaccination as an appropriate satisfier of children’s health needs and a mode of access in which the state makes that satisfier mandatory rather than leaving its use to parental discretion. Voice and advocacy thus become contestation. But recognizing the political significance of this contestation does not determine how the state should respond to it. At least three possibilities can be distinguished. Public authorities may simply disregard the objections and enforce the policy coercively. They may treat the contestation as sufficient reason to withdraw or relax the obligation. Or they may engage with the objections, offer reasons for rejecting them, and nevertheless maintain compulsory vaccination on the grounds that the needs of children and of other affected persons should take priority over the claims advanced by the contesting parents. The third possibility is particularly important because it shows that taking contestation seriously need not entail accepting the claims made through it.

This suggests that several questions that are easily conflated should be kept distinct. Whether actors should be able to contest an institutionalized interpretation of needs is one question; whether their contestation should be regarded as politically legitimate is another; whether the claims and reasons advanced through it are valid is yet another. Even a legitimate possibility of contestation cannot imply a right to determine the outcome of the conflict. Otherwise, contestation would cease to function as a means of challenging established interpretations and would become a veto power.

The vaccination example therefore brings us back to the difficulty with which this section began. Voice, advocacy, and contestation make visible forms of power that would disappear if public authorities or experts were simply granted the final authority to define needs and their satisfiers. But none of these practices supplies an alternative source of final authority. Voice does not make first-person interpretations infallible; advocacy does not identify the uniquely authoritative representative of those unable to speak for themselves; and contestation does not establish that the claims of those who challenge an arrangement should prevail. Rather than resolving the politics of needs, these practices make its conflicts explicit.

The three constellations considered above differ considerably, but they reveal a common problem. Taking voice, advocacy, and contestation seriously means allowing interpretations of needs and satisfiers to enter the political process even when there are strong reasons to consider them mistaken. Yet the political character of needs does not make the consequences of their interpretation politically constructed. Needs may be politically interpreted, but the harms resulting from their non-satisfaction are not thereby reducible to political interpretations. This distinction follows from the conception of needs adopted in this article. A need differs from a desire or preference precisely because its non-satisfaction results in objective harm. Social mediation affects the identification and interpretation of needs, the selection of their satisfiers, and the institutional organization of access to them. It does not imply that every interpretation produces an equally adequate response to the harm in question. Muthoni may intelligibly regard circumcision as a satisfier of her need for belonging while the practice irreversibly damages other capacities. A community may understand a ritual as an appropriate response to drought while remaining without the water required for its members' survival. Parents may sincerely understand refusal of vaccination as a way of protecting their children while exposing them to preventable disease and death. In each case, taking the interpretation seriously does not require treating its consequences as a matter of interpretation.

The problem can be described as a tension between political and epistemic authority. Voice gives those affected political standing in the interpretation of their needs, but it does not make their interpretations epistemically infallible. Their social position may give them epistemic access to dimensions of their situation that remain less visible to others, but this situated knowledge does not amount to epistemic sovereignty. Conversely, scientific or professional expertise may provide good reasons for rejecting particular empirical claims about satisfiers and their effects, but it does not thereby confer unrestricted political authority to define the needs of others or to impose particular arrangements for their satisfaction. Political standing and epistemic authority may coincide, but there is no reason to assume that they necessarily do.

This becomes particularly visible when doxa conflicts with episteme. A politics of needs cannot respond to such conflicts simply by silencing doxa, since doing so would restore the monopoly of experts and institutions over the interpretation of needs. But neither can it treat doxa and episteme as epistemically equivalent merely because both enter the political arena. The possibility of objective harm places a constraint on the politics of needs without providing a general algorithm for resolving every conflict. It allows us to criticize interpretations and satisfiers in light of what they do to the persons concerned, while leaving open the political question of who should decide, through which institutions, and under what conditions when interpretations remain in conflict. There is therefore no reason to expect the politics of needs to culminate in a procedure capable of producing the correct decision in every case. Objective harm can provide reasons for rejecting certain interpretations or claimed satisfiers without determining a uniquely correct alternative. We may have good reasons to reject female circumcision as a satisfier without being able to determine from the outside how Muthoni's need for belonging should instead be satisfied; to reject ritual practices as sufficient responses to water scarcity without deciding what place they should occupy alongside effective material measures; or to reject claims about the

dangers of vaccination without thereby settling every question concerning parental authority, public coercion, and compulsory vaccination. In such cases, knowledge can constrain the range of politically defensible responses without eliminating the need for political decision.

This is why conflicts between doxa and episteme cannot be resolved simply by assigning final authority either to those affected or to those who possess relevant expertise. The former would turn political standing into epistemic authority; the latter would turn epistemic authority into political power. A politics of needs must instead confront the fact that decisions are made under conditions in which voice, knowledge, interests, vulnerability, and power are unequally distributed, and in which even well-grounded knowledge may leave more than one politically possible course of action. The absence of a universally applicable criterion is therefore not a defect that a more complete normative theory could simply remedy. It is one of the conditions under which the politics of needs takes place.

6. Concluding Remarks

The political dimension of needs begins well before questions concerning the distribution of resources or the institutional provision of satisfiers. It concerns the power to identify and interpret needs, to determine which satisfiers count as appropriate, and to organize the modes through which access to them is granted or denied. Because needs are socially mediated, none of these processes can be understood as merely technical or epistemic.

Voice, advocacy, and contestation are therefore essential dimensions of the politics of needs. They make it possible to challenge established interpretations and to expose forms of power that remain invisible when experts, institutions, or dominant social groups are granted exclusive authority to define what people need. Yet, as the cases discussed above have shown, none of them provides a criterion for determining which interpretation or satisfier should prevail. Political standing does not entail epistemic authority, just as epistemic authority does not by itself confer political authority.

This does not leave a political theory of needs without critical resources. The concept of objective harm makes it possible to reject interpretations and satisfiers that expose people to severe harm without requiring a general normative principle capable of determining the uniquely correct response in every case. Knowledge can constrain political decisions without replacing them. The politics of needs thus remains a field of conflict in which interpretations, knowledge, interests, and relations of power intersect, and in which the absence of a final normative criterion is not the disappearance of critique but one of the conditions under which critique must operate.[7]

Declarations

Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analysed.

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Author Contribution

Alessandro Pinzani is the sole author of this article and was responsible for its conceptualization, research, writing, and revision.

Acknowledgement

The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language editing and stylistic revision of the manuscript. The author reviewed and approved all suggested changes and takes full responsibility for the final text.

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Footnotes

1. On the objective harm provoked by the non-satisfaction of needs, see Clark Miller, 2005; McLeod, 2014; and Assiter & Noonan, 2007.
2. On the politics of needs, see also Hamilton, 2003.
3. This claim is related to the central insight of standpoint epistemology that social position can provide access to epistemically relevant experiences and perspectives without thereby making the claims of socially situated subjects infallible. See, among others, Harding, 1991; Wylie, 2003.
4. This is the phenomenon described as adaptive preferences. On adaptive preferences, see, among others: Elster, 1983; Khader, 2011; Mitchell, 2018.
5. The difficulties involved in the relation between voice and representation have been famously discussed by Gayatri Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, particularly in her critique of the assumption that allowing subordinated subjects to speak can simply bypass the problem of representation (Spivak, 1988).
6. I am grateful to an audience member at the XXX held at XXX in September 2026 for suggesting this possible constellation during the discussion.
7. I would like to thank XXX and the other participants in the XXX that took place at XXX in September 2026 for their critical remarks.