Introduction

In March 2009, First Lady Michelle Obama volunteered to serve food at a Washington, DC homeless shelter. Obama said that she wanted merely to "give back" to a community in economic distress and to encourage other Americans to volunteer to help the "less fortunate" in their own communities. Obama's actions proved more controversial than she imagined, however. In this case, a squabble broke out in the press and in political blogs over a photograph taken at the event. The picture is of an unidentified African-American man using a cell phone to take a picture of the First Lady. Examining the photograph, Andrew Malcolm, a blogger for the *Los Angeles Times*, asked: "If this unidentified meal recipient is too poor to buy his own food, how does he afford a cellphone? And if he is homeless, where do they send the cellphone bills?"

Lurking in these questions and made explicit by conservative bloggers Michelle Malkin (2009), Kathy Shaidle (2009), and Kathryn Lopez (2009), is the classic stereotype of the "Cadillac-driving welfare queen." In this well-established script, a putatively needy person is presented as one who could meet her own needs by herself (the welfare queen character is, of course, female) but is not doing so. Rather she is living a life of luxury and excess. In this version, some of the elements of the narrative have been changed: the welfare queen has become male and the corruption is symbolized not by the apocryphal Cadillac but by the possession of a cell phone. Yet the story's core elements remain. The man in the photograph is manipulating

people's desire to help the less fortunate in order to receive governmental support for undeserved luxuries, and so he becomes a corrupt or cunning con artist and the rest of us become his mark. Shaidle articulates this basic narrative quite plainly in her curiously detailed portrait:

> Today's "poor" are the rich Jesus warned you about: fat, slovenly, wasteful of their money and other people's. . . . He spends all his (our) money on cellphones and, most likely, tattoos and drugs and booze and other crap, and has no money left for a home and food. And why should he bother? We pay for his shelter and food anyhow. What's really funny in that news story by the way is what they're serving at the soup kitchen: risotto with brocolli [sic]. Obviously some rich white liberal did the cooking that day, feeling all proud of herself, and what thanks did she get? Some lowclass loser going, "You expect me to eat this weird crap?!"

Malkin and Lopez evoke similar imagery, although somewhat less colorfully. Malkin emphasizes that the man's possession of a cell phone implies that he is not deserving of the "sob story" that she accuses Obama of invoking. Parodying a line from a Crystal Waters song (the original line is: "She's just like you and me/But she's homeless, she's homeless"), Malkin writes: "In DC, the homeless are just like you and me, and they have cell phones, they have cell phones." Interestingly, Malkin reverses the meaning of the original song's appeal to commonality. Where Waters hopes that casting the homeless person as "just like you and me" might generate a kind of solidarity with the homeless, Malkin deploys the same commonality as a resource for evoking disgust. The fact that he is "just like you and me" is precisely the reason why he is so immoral and contemptible, for if he is just like us, he should not need government assistance or help at a homeless shelter.[1] For her part, Lopez sounds a more compassionate note while invoking the same core argument: "I don't envy this man's situation, whatever it is, and don't mean to make light of it. But we are a blessed people when our [!] poor have cellphones."

[1] The rest of Malkin's statements are only slightly less racially charged than Shaidle's. She goes on to compare the idea of homeless people having cell phones to a "slum dweller" in New Orleans having a large-screen television, and she mocks the claim that homeless people need cell phones to get jobs, sarcastically exclaiming "do they need Blackberry Pearls!?"

One hesitates to argue with statements like these. Indeed, it is difficult to know what there is to argue about, since both Shaidle and Malkin more or less refute themselves. In an update to her post, for example, Shaidle acknowledges that there are programs that provide subsidized or free cell phones for the poor, although she fails to note that this fact undermines her entire narrative about the man in the photograph. Similarly, Malkin admits that there is a potentially good reason for such a subsidy. Given the lack of pay phones, cell phones are increasingly the only way for poor people to communicate with, say, would-be employers. Malkin mocks this point but does not really discuss it, let alone refute it. Even more peculiarly, none of the participants knows anything about the man in the photograph. The accompanying story does not identify him; we know nothing about him, not even that he is homeless, let alone his body-decorating habits and food preferences. Lopez's declaration that she "does not envy" his situation, and Shaidle's profile of him likely say more about the bloggers' own fantasies and preoccupations than it does about the man in the picture.[2] Thus, it is rather difficult to argue against these statements because it is difficult to discern a position in them at all, if by "position" one means a stance on the question at hand that is more or less backed up with reasons (for example, whether charity should play a role in dealing with issues of poverty, or whether there should be

[2] Shaidle's identification of the chef who produced the dish as a "white liberal" is equally odd. Perhaps Shaidle is implying that the First Lady did not actually make the dish, or perhaps she is trying to position the First Lady as symbolically white (an effort that, of course, conflicts with the other prominent depiction of Ms. Obama as a militant black activist). Yet I believe that Shaidle's invocation of race here is primarily designed not as a comment on the First Lady at all, but as a deployment of another classic stereotype of liberals: the liberal as "clueless" or "out of touch." In identifying the chef as a "white liberal," and in insisting that the food the chef prepared is rejected by the homeless person, she means to suggest that, their efforts to help the poor notwithstanding, liberals simply do not understand the tastes (and genuine needs) of the poor. This allows her to position herself as somehow more in tune with poor people's desires, even as she dismisses them as "lowclass losers." The prominent conservative theorist of the welfare state Lawrence Mead (2005) makes a rather similar argument in more sophisticated terms, suggesting that the activism of the 1960s generated a "complaining style" of citizenship and that "claims by the poor, women, and nonwhites tend to be voiced [not by] those groups themselves, but by self-appointed advocates" (183). Citing Wendy Brown (!) (1995), he suggests both that this style of politics reinforces the sense of victimhood and also that those self-appointed advocates do not really understand the true needs of those for whom they attempt to speak.

programs, governmental or otherwise, to subsidize cell phones for the poor).

Still, although these statements may not articulate a policy position, many liberals felt the need to refute the core features of the welfare-queen narrative that they invoke. Jesse Taylor (2009), a blogger at pandagon.net and a communication director for former Ohio governor Ted Strickland, exemplifies this response quite well. In a critique of Lopez, Malkin, and Shaidle, Taylor writes:

> Suppose you are actually homeless in America. The public pay phone has essentially gone the way of the dodo in most of the country. If you have any desire – at all – to not be homeless anymore, one of the basic things you're going to need is a way for people to communicate with you. People call you for jobs and for housing and for food and for any number of things. On the one hand, you could be an idiot and consider this an indicator of how great the homeless have it in America, because they have anything to sort of call their own. On the other hand, you could consider that poor people throughout history have often had things to call their own, and poverty isn't made any less cripplingly shitty because you have 120 minutes of airtime a month.

Taylor mobilizes two interrelated arguments to reject the depiction of the putatively homeless man as a welfare queen con artist. First, he argues that a cell phone is a basic need, which both explains why the government might provide cell phones to the poor and undercuts the idea that the man must have gotten the cell phone through immoral behavior. More importantly for our purposes, Taylor also insists that the neediness that comes from poverty, even when a poor person has some possessions, produces a "cripplingly shitty" life. Taylor thus represents the man's apparent neediness not just as unpleasant but all consuming. Indeed, it becomes something close to an ontological category that defines the whole of one's being. On this account, the homeless man is crippled and outside of the "normal" symbolic and political order: he is too busy, ground down, under-educated, and abject to have a family or meet his economic obligations, let alone to engage in the demands of democratic citizenship. This is why the appearance of neediness is so frequently linked to moral orientations and political projects that go beyond traditional liberal democratic principles of respect for people's autonomy. Since a needy person cannot participate as an equal, one must respond to his appearance with a kind of compassion or desire to "help," as the First Lady put it.

At first glance, it might appear that Malcolm, Shaidle, Malkin, and Lopez reject this depiction of neediness as crippling. This is an error, however. The welfare-queen narrative that they invoke by no means rejects the idea that there are genuinely needy people and that they are "crippled" by their need. On the contrary, the figure of the welfare queen is wholly parasitic on such an assumption. The story about the welfare queen is, after all, a story of betrayal. The claim is not that genuinely needy people do not exist, nor is it that the needy do not lead "cripplingly shitty" lives deserving of help, even if this help should take the form of "tough love" that forces them "back on their feet." Rather, the claim is that *this* person or *this* group is not adequately following the script that Taylor invokes. One aims to provide help to those who cannot help themselves but finds instead that they *can* help themselves but *are not doing so*; as a result, they are not really innocent enough or crippled enough to count as genuinely needy. Thus, one reacts in anger and disgust, but one also gains hard-earned wisdom about the supposed neediness of this person or group: they are frauds, and their needs are illusory or merely the result of their own immoral behavior.[3]

Nor is this depiction of the needy as outside the normal symbolic or political order restricted to blog wars. It also appears in the history of political and social theory, where needs, and those consumed by them, appear as a usually unwelcome but sometimes celebrated interruption of normal politics. The most famous example of

[3] The broad outlines of this narrative can be found almost explicitly in Charles Murray's (1984) (in)famous critique of the "War on Poverty," *Losing Ground*. Murray emphasizes on a number of occasions that, at the beginning of the civil rights movement, African Americans enjoyed enormous moral prestige, and that this prestige is part of the reason why there was so much interest in helping poor African Americans escape their poverty. However, this prestige ultimately generates only disappointment as the programs fail to work and as it turns out that poor African Americans are actually being encouraged to indulge in immoral and counterproductive behavior. More pointedly, Murray suggests that the main impetus for undertaking the War on Poverty was simply white liberal guilt about the history of racism, which the African-American poor were able to manipulate. Importantly, nearly every aspect of Murray's argument has been refuted (see Katz 1989: 151ff; Greenstein 1985; Jencks 1985; Dolbeare and Lidman 1985; and McLanahan et al. 1985). And so what is of interest in his text, just as in the bloggers' statements about Michelle Obama's work at the homeless shelter, is only the ideological narrative and why it tends to be so convincing.

this conception of neediness is Hannah Arendt, who worries that the entrance of needs, particularly those of the poor, into the public realm tends to destroy the possibility for political action. The focus on need, she argues, reduces humans to the realm of necessity, thus leading us into nonpolitical orientations (compassion or pity, for instance) and into nonpolitical practices of administration, the redistribution of goods, and even terror. Neediness on this account draws us away from the "excess" life – freedom, the generation of new powers, and action in concert – that she identifies as the goal and condition of politics. Perhaps confirming Arendt's worries, most modern political thought and practice rejects her warnings and takes it for granted that solving the problems of need is a major moral and political concern. Certainly there is ongoing debate about how to define legitimate needs, what obligations they generate, and whether the state, or private or semiprivate agencies should be responsible for dealing with them. Yet all these positions hold that need is a problem that politics must solve, and that the responsibilities and orientations to this problem is at least in tension with normal liberal democratic principles. In most conceptions of liberal democracy, a society is held to be legitimate insofar as it guarantees each person's individual ability to form and follow a conception of the good and allows each citizen to participate in forming the laws and institutions by which citizens live their lives together. As I have already suggested, however, the general assumption is that needy people cannot adhere to either practice. They are too corrupt or too abject to form and follow a conception of the good (for example, to consume rationally, work in the formal economy, or participate in the nuclear family), or to participate in democratic procedures. Indeed, as we see in the chapters that follow, they are frequently depicted as straightforwardly incompetent, and so we (the normal and autonomous citizens) must figure out a (frequently though not necessarily hierarchical and paternalistic) mechanism for managing or helping them, at least if we are to sustain a just and humane society.[4]

[4] For a philosophical approach that argues that there is a moral obligation to help the needy, see Braybrooke (1987) and Thomson (2005). Their goal is to provide a definition of truly "basic" or "thin" needs – i.e., those needs that are not subject to cultural or political interpretation – and then to explain the kinds of moral obligations these needs generate.

More positive valuations of the political effects of the need are also possible. There is a recent trend in political theory to treat need and the vulnerability associated with it as a means to develop a new ontology of the subject, one that is different than the oft-criticized rational and autonomous agent attributed to political liberalism. One finds this motif in some feminist theorists of care, who treat human need and the care relations necessary to respond to it not as problems to be solved on the way to achieving autonomy, but as integral to the human condition and paradigmatic of our moral relationships (cf. Kittay 1999). There is a similar idea in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, when he casts the "naked" neediness and vulnerability of the other as the source of ethical responsibility, or in the argument that needs can provide minimalist justification for rights or other moral obligations to others (cf. Baker and Jones 1998; Goodin 1998; Miller 2005; Moore 1972; Turner 2006; for critiques of this recent turn to vulnerability, see Ferrarese 2009; Honig 2010). Finally, there is also a positive valuation of the needy that focuses not on how they challenge contemporary conceptions of subjectivity, but on the sociological and symbolic place they occupy within a social order. Here the needy usually appear as impoverished, and this position in the sociocultural order might make them into potential agents for welcome social transformations. Slavoj Žižek (2008), for example, suggests that the slum dwellers of many of the world's large cities constitute those who have no "place" within the existing order, and thus might "constitute one of the principal horizons of the politics to come" (426). James Scott (1985, 1992) and John Gilliom (2001) explore the forms of "everyday resistance" of marginal and needy people as a challenge to the existing order and a way to prepare for more transformative forms of politics. In all of these cases, the needy and the poor do not function as problems to be solved or contained. Rather, they are a resource for a new kind of ethical commonality and humanistic solidarity, a means to justify an alternative set of political and moral principles, and/or agents and symbols of welcome social transformations. Still, even these more positive valuations of the needy reiterate the classic assumptions described above. The needy appear as threats or interruptions to the dominant political or moral orientations. The difference is that these theorists welcome these interruptions.

Taking these positions and debates as a background and ongoing provocation, I wish to explore the phenomenon of need from a different angle. My interest is not in determining what people's genuine needs are or what obligations, if any, such needs generate. Nor do I answer the question of whether or what kind of threat to political life the appearance of needs create. Rather, similar to Honig's (2001) investigation of foreignness, I am interested in what neediness does for us. What does it mean, and what kinds of roles does it play in various political and theoretical projects? Although in Chapter 1 I discuss neediness and vulnerability as they relate to cognitive disability, my main focus is on depictions of neediness in the recent controversies in the United States over poverty and social welfare. I read political speeches, Supreme Court cases, blogs, policy papers, and media accounts of the poor and their needs. I also read texts in contemporary political theory, particularly work in deliberative democracy, recent work on vulnerability and feminist theories of care, liberal jurisprudence, and critical studies of race. Throughout, I look at the often-overlooked roles that neediness plays in these texts, and I explore the lessons that these roles might provide for our understanding of democratic politics.

I find that neediness often functions as it does in the example discussed above, as a marker of a person's corruption or pathetic incompetency. In these cases, one might argue with Mouffe and Laclau (1985) that neediness forms a kind of "constitutive outside" that defines the normal citizen by establishing what "we" are not. Or one might argue with the deliberative democrats that neediness in these cases has become a means of exclusion, which we must overcome by somehow expanding practices of deliberation so as to include even those who have been designated as needy. Yet neither reading captures the diversity and often productive meanings of neediness that are also present: sometimes neediness turns a group of people into agents of welcome or unwelcome change, or it signifies some essential set of human traits that can become the basis for a kind of humanistic solidarity; in other cases, it becomes an opportunity to articulate and display important moral values, or it becomes a sign of the broad social structures that (perhaps unfairly) shape people's opportunities. Neediness can even, as we shall see throughout, signify not just a welcome or unwelcome threat to existing politics but an entrance into it.

Such a diversity of meanings associated with neediness invites us to investigate the forms of symbolic politics that produce them. Thus, instead of asking how we should define need and what we should do about it, I look at the cultural and political discourses that constitute certain phenomena as needs and certain people as (truly or falsely) needy, and I examine what work these designations do in various political projects. Finally, as part of the exploration of what lessons these dynamics might provide for our understanding of democratic politics, I also examine how those who are designated as needy contest or redeploy those designations.

One could argue that this kind of investigation is inapt or unnecessary. If some needs are understood as fundamental, and some people are represented as needy and (therefore) incapable of participating equally in social and political life, this is because they *are*. Consider the need for shelter, an example Nancy Fraser (1989b) uses to demonstrate the political character of needs. One can agree with Fraser that disputes might break out over this need – say, over what kind of shelter a person needs (a cardboard box under a bridge? a bed in a homeless shelter? a permanent residence? an apartment? a single-family home in the suburbs?), how best to provide the shelter (direct government provision? tax incentives? rent controls? rent subsidies? private charity?), or how to help maintain people within it (jobs? job training? cell phones?) (cf. 163). Although Fraser does not note this directly, one could also admit that these disagreements largely concern the cultural meaning of the need and the means to satisfy it. Some might argue that, say, taxpayer subsidies for housing is a need, but others might argue, as the conservative bloggers cited above surely would, that it is not really a need but a kind of theft from hardworking taxpayers.

Yet in spite of these admissions, one can still argue that there are dimensions of the need for shelter that transcend these controversies. As even Fraser acknowledges, the controversies over the need for shelter emerge only insofar as one goes beyond basic needs into the realm of more contextual and instrumental needs, which are then sometimes downgraded to mere "desires" or "wants" (cf. Thomson 2005: 175). If we stick with the need for shelter simpliciter, by contrast, Fraser admits that the space for variable cultural and political meanings narrows significantly or even disappears outright (Fraser 1989b: 163). At least in nontropical climates, the need for shelter in and of itself

appears to be utterly basic and univocal. It is an uninterpreted, irrevocable, and all-consuming given, a fact to which anyone who has survived an unsheltered night in freezing weather can well attest. It is for this reason, one is tempted to say, that the conservative bloggers' statements that cast a homeless man as actually pretty well off sound clueless and heartless. One might argue that the proper response to a homeless person's neediness is a kind of paternalism that links the help he receives to expectations of proper behavior from him, but to deny that he is actually in need and that this need demands some kind of response seems not just wrong but inhuman and immoral. In short, it seems that there are certain phenomena that transcend such political controversies, and so it remains important to identify which needs are absolutely basic and what obligations (if any) their existence generates.

Matters are not quite so simple, however. It is surely true that there are bodily needs and that the inability to satisfy them confronts the person with overwhelming and, as it were, world-destroying forms of suffering and desire. Still, there is reason to be dubious about efforts to treat such needs as a kind of univocal, brute, and material facticity that grounds and limits more culturally variable and contingent expressions. Consider a need that theorists of needs always cite as an example of something fundamental, the need for food. Nothing, we must admit, seems more natural, constant, and irrevocable than this need. It appears equally obvious that one must satisfy this need before one can enter a life of politics. Yet the need for food is by no means a univocal and material ground. This is because a need is never just a brute fact, but also something that must be declared and received, and this process is always bound up with politically and culturally inflected interpretations. To echo some of the insights of Jacques Rancière (1999) or Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) early work, what theorists call "thin needs" are those which language casts as basic; they are needs that a speech community designates as outside of and more fundamental than the variable modes of linguistic expression or meaning.

Thus, the "fact" of the need for food cannot be separated from its culturally variable and (potentially) controversial meanings. No matter how desperately hungry a person is, the need for food simpliciter must always appear as a need for a particular food, and this particular food always exceeds the basics. One's need for food, that is, always