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Citation

Hammersley, Martyn (2024). Should Sociology be Normative? *The American Sociologist*, 55 pp. 24–37.

URL

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Should Sociology be Normative?

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Accepted: 7 November 2023 / Published online: 20 November 2023
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Abstract

This article critically examines recent arguments by Andrew Abbott, Jensen Sass, and Tariq Modood proposing a normative sociology, one that not only adopts an evaluative stance towards the phenomena it investigates, but also makes explicit and seeks to justify the values on which its evaluations rely. I argue that, while these proposals are to be welcomed in some respects, they fail to address two key issues: On what reasonable basis can it be assumed that there are single correct answers to value questions?; and What distinctive intellectual authority can sociologists claim to be able to discover those answers? I also point out that these recent advocates for a normative sociology pay insufficient attention to the opposing position, a commitment to ‘value-neutrality’, as proposed most notably by Max Weber. I argue that, while this is frequently ignored or dismissed out of hand, it represents a much more coherent and cogent view, even if its advocates have rarely fully lived up to its demands.

Keywords Normative Sociology · Value Neutrality · Value Freedom · Andrew Abbott · Jensen Sass · Tariq Modood

In the past few years there have been renewed proposals for a normative sociology (Abbott, 2016, 2018:chs 8 and 9; Sass, 2018; Modood, 2020, 2022). There is an important sense, of course, in which much sociology has long been normative, often implicitly – where policy recommendations are drawn from empirical findings as if they followed automatically – but also sometimes explicitly – not least, for example, in the form of ‘critical’, feminist, and anti-racist work. In addition, there have been recurrent arguments that sociology necessarily operates on the basis of a substructure of political, ideological, or even religious assumptions (Bramson, 1961;

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Gouldner, 1970; Strasser, 1976; Smith, 2014). What is distinctive about recent proposals that sociological analysis should be normative is an insistence that the values underpinning it must be both clarified and justified. This is to be achieved by drawing on political theory, directly or indirectly, and/or through examining the normative assumptions of key sociological texts from the past.¹ In this paper I will outline these recent proposals for a normative sociology, and assess the arguments offered in support of them.

The Case for Normative Sociology

The starting point for all three of the writers I discuss here is that, while in a broad sense much sociology has been normative, there has generally been little attention to the value assumptions it relies upon, and very little effort to provide justifications for them – they have been largely taken for granted. These writers challenge this and outline how it must be changed. While they vary somewhat about what this would entail, they share much in common: the insistence that sociologists should not shy away from addressing normative questions, and that their engagement with these must be explicit and philosophically rigorous.²

In his article calling for such a normative sociology, Abbott (2018) outlines four explicit models of the relationship between values and sociology, and he goes on to assess their viability and integrity. The first is what he refers to as ‘dualism’, which he takes to be represented by ‘the “value-free” position of Max Weber’ (Abbott, 2018:159). Here a distinction is maintained between factual and value issues; and so, for example, from this point of view ‘inequality and injustice are normative concepts, not scientific ones’ (p160). The role of sociology is to provide ‘scientifically accurate information and theory to the legitimate political system, which that system will then use as it sees fit’ (p159). On this model, sociologist and political actor are two quite separate roles: they can be ‘played by a single individual, but only through complete compartmentalization’ (p159).

The second approach Abbott discusses is the ‘monist position’. Here, no distinction is drawn between factual and value questions, so that sociology necessarily deals with both. He argues that most sociologists today adopt this position, and that this reflects the ‘reformist voice’ that has sounded through the discipline from the beginning. However, what he has in mind here is not just sociological work that is explicitly partisan: he suggests that it includes that where ‘the rhetorical structure of our research reports remains in the value free or dualist mode’, but ‘is not in practice isolated from political or normative action’, may ‘directly address political questions’, and ‘usually does not conceal its authors’ political preferences’ (p159).

Abbott’s verdict on the first two options, dualism and monism, is that they are ‘embarrassingly weak’: the first because few sociologists now accept it; the second

¹ However, it should be noted that there have previously been calls for a normative social science based on natural law, notably by Strauss (1953). See also Chernilo, 2013.

² A similar kind of linkage between sociology and political theory has been deployed by Swift (2004), see also Marshall et al., 1997.

because it fails to make explicit and to justify its value commitments, with the result that they remain vague and potentially inconsistent. In response to this, he outlines two other options as possible ways forward. The first is what he calls the ‘canonical model’, in which a subdiscipline dealing with normative issues is established, on the model of political philosophy. This would be organised as ‘a set of canonical moral texts and a formally normative discourse, and would make of the set texts and discourse an apparatus with which to investigate the normative dimensions of modern social questions, at a general, theoretical level’ (pp160–1). The second alternative Abbott proposes is the ‘legalist approach’. Here the focus is not on the history of sociological ideas but on identifying, clarifying, and justifying the value positions underpinning past sociological studies. Rather than working from the theoretical level down, in the manner of the canonical model, this would work up from examining existing sociological work ‘for both scientific rigor and normative excellence’, thereby constructing ‘a body of systematic concepts and precepts, giving clearer shape to a concept of normative excellence as its work evolved’ (p161). Abbott recommends a combination of these two strategies.

Jensen Sass (2018) largely agrees with Abbott’s assessment of the problem and his proposed remedy. He draws a term from the work of Habermas (1987: 276) to note that much sociology is ‘crypto-normative’, and insists that it must become explicitly and systematically normative. He goes on to point out that there is an exemplar for normative sociology in the work of James Coleman. In the wake of his research on educational inequalities, Coleman explored the concept of educational inequality (Coleman, 1968, 1973) and engaged with the political philosophies of John Rawls and Robert Nozick (Coleman, 1974, 1976a, b, c). Based on empirically-grounded sociological theory, he proposed a modification to Rawls’ (1971) outline of how a consensus could be reached about what is a just society (Coleman, 1974). He suggested that sociology should be normative and not ‘value-free’ (ibid. p.742), and Favell (1993:590) has claimed that this amounts to producing ‘a positive social theory’. Sass argues that, rather than the establishment of a new branch of sociology, as suggested by Abbott, all sociological practice ought to be normative, both in the sense of addressing normative questions, and in providing explicit justification for the principles on which it is based. What would be involved here is continual reference to ethical and political philosophy during the course of sociological work. He offers the example of research aimed at ‘fashioning global policies necessary to lessening the severity of catastrophic climate change’ (p453). He argues, along with Coleman, that ‘empirical sociology can challenge and chasten political theory’ (p454).

Independently of Abbott and Sass, Modood (2020, 2022) also recommended an explicitly normative approach to sociology, in the context of his advocacy of multiculturalism in the UK (Modood, 2013; Levey, 2019). As with the previous two authors, a distinctive feature of Modood’s normative sociology is that the values on which normative judgments are made must be explicit and justified, drawing directly on political philosophy. Indeed, Modood proposes a distinction between normative sociology per se, where evaluations are made of social phenomena, and ‘normative sociological theory’, which is concerned with clarifying and justifying the value judgments involved in this work. In some ways this is analogous to Abbott’s call for a separate normative subdiscipline.

Modood starts from multiculturalism as a normative political theory, as found in the writings of Taylor (1994), Kymlicka (1995), and Parekh (2006), as well as in his own work (Modood, 2013). However, multiculturalism is, of course, also a central theme in many sociological investigations of the sources of disadvantage or oppression suffered by ethnic minorities, and how they experience and resist this. Modood argues that these two enterprises have largely been carried out separately, so that the philosophical work has not fully benefited from empirical investigations, while sociological studies have often failed to be fully conscious of the values on which they are relying and the conceptual complexities surrounding these. He therefore insists that sociology must go beyond simply adopting a normative orientation: it must develop ‘normative sociological theory’, which ‘engages critically with its own normative assumptions in order to justify, refine, and develop them or place them within a larger normative framework or tradition of thought; it seeks normative grounding for its sociology [...]’ (Modood, 2022:2).

The result of this is an interdisciplinary ‘hybrid’ of normative political theory and empirical political sociology. Modood explains that “my empirical analyses are informed by advocacy, by making [...] a multiculturalist case. Either by arguing in favour of something that has happened (an action, policy or law) or supporting a protest or campaign or recommending a course of action or a policy programme’ (Modood, 2020:30). But in doing so he ‘eschews the abstract, top-down universalism of Rawlsian liberal egalitarianism in favour of a context of national citizenship and pays particular attention to bottom-up political struggle’ (Modood, 2020:abstract). As this makes clear, what is involved is not simply studying political struggles but actively engaging in them to promote desirable outcomes. And this is based on a form of ‘contextualism’ in which the interpretation of universal values, such as justice, is tempered by local norms, following ‘intimations’ from the situation as to what is likely to be most appropriate in the circumstances.

A Critical Assessment

All of these authors rightly recognise the crypto-normative character of much sociology today, and the problems that result from this: it implicitly takes for granted questionable value judgments; and this can lead to speculative and sometimes biased conclusions, as well as simplistic evaluations and recommendations.³ While highlighting this is certainly to be welcomed, it seems to me that none of these authors acknowledges the extent to which value-laden sociology has been pushed by some (as documented, for example, by Smith, 2014). More importantly, they do not present a convincing case for a normative orientation on the part of sociologists.

Before making my own assessment, however, it is necessary to note the criteria that Abbott (2018:161-2) puts forward as underpinning his appraisal of the four options he outlines. In summary, these criteria are:

1. *Feasibility*: has it been shown that what the option proposes is viable?

³ Foster et al. (1996) provide examples of this problem in the field of education.

2. *Intellectual coherence.* Here he asks: ‘Is there a body of work that embodies the basic principles and discourse involved in this alternative approach? Are there procedural rules that can preserve mutual understanding in the face of divisive issues? Are there ways to avoid excessive allegiance to particular political or moral programs?’ (p161).
3. *Likely long-run trajectory.* Here he says: ‘We don’t want a normative sociology that can turn into something dangerous, but neither do we want it to be unable to change. [...] [W]e must ask whether a proposed approach has the Deweyan ability to experiment coupled with a classical liberal’s desire to avoid the usual catastrophes: tyranny of the majority, capture by absolutist ideologies, and so on. Is it able to preserve and indeed grow master principles over the long run?’ (p161).
4. *Open-mindedness:* Does the option take account of cultural difference? He writes that ‘one would ultimately want to create a form of moral inquiry that could somehow address [the] moral diversity of the world: not simply by making it go away, which would seem to be a unitary project of domination, but by somehow taking account of it, adjusting to it so that there would result a new and newly productive – but not mutually destructive – set of divergences’ (pp161-2).

I have to admit that, while I can see the rationale for some of these criteria, I find much of what Abbott says about them puzzling, and he does not explain why just these criteria are the relevant ones. Feasibility is a reasonable consideration regarding any venture, though judging it is difficult where the task involved is a very challenging one, as is the case with sociological research. If we take what Abbott calls dualism, it has to be recognised that value neutrality is an ideal, and one which it is by no means straightforward to adhere to in practice – given unconscious biases, and the complexities surrounding how research reports are interpreted by diverse audiences (Becker, 1967; Hammersley, 2000:ch3). The key question is whether a commitment to value-neutrality improves the quality of the research carried out. For reasons I will explain later, I believe it does, but I would not deny the difficulties involved in reaching this conclusion. By contrast, a normative sociology is clearly feasible in the sense that there is a lot of it about (Abbott, 2018:168), but the question of its quality is highly contestable; indeed, there would not even be agreement amongst its advocates about the criteria of quality that should be used, and the very notion of criteria could be rejected (Hammersley, 2024).

Intellectual coherence seems to be a much more straightforward criterion, even if some of Abbott’s discussion renders it obscure. And this will be one of my criteria. But Abbott’s third criterion is very questionable, not least because it is unclear how we could predict ‘future trajectory’, as he himself acknowledges. It also begs the question of whether we should only adopt positions that can be sustained into the future, a future that is very uncertain indeed, not least because of the effects of climate change. And the final criterion is problematic in a different way: what exactly

does ‘taking account of cultural difference’ mean? Abbott’s outline of what might be involved does little to clarify this.⁴

My focus here will be entirely on the question of whether a normative sociology is intellectually coherent and cogent. The fundamental issue is that, for it to be justifiable, sociologists must have some authoritative means by which rationally to justify their value judgments *in a manner which establishes that these are the best judgments to adopt in the cases concerned*. Another way of putting this is to ask what the grounds are for the intellectual authority of sociologists. The, by no means entirely unproblematic, basis for this has previously been that, like natural science, it can produce results, about a specific set of topics, that are more likely to be true than knowledge claims from other sources. What is distinctive about normative sociology is that it seeks to extend this, claiming that sociology is capable of producing better practical evaluations of social phenomena than can be provided by lay people. But why should anyone believe this?

Abbott, Sass, and Modood suggest that this claim to normative expertise can be justified through engaging with political philosophy or employing it as a model. However, while some work in political philosophy does offer evaluations of particular social situations, institutional arrangements, etc., it is far from clear that this is done on the basis of a set of principles that is a matter of agreement even among political philosophers. Indeed, that discipline displays quite fundamental disagreements.⁵ As an illustration, compare Coleman’s appeal to a modified version of Rawlsian liberal political philosophy, endorsed by Sass, with Modood’s reliance on the ideas of Bhikhu Parekh and Michael Oakeshott. There are deep differences between these two traditions of work, and even these do not gauge the full range of disagreement, which can be highlighted further by pointing to the existence of a Straussian tradition of political philosophy that shares little with either of them.⁶ Aside from this, it is far from clear that Oakeshott would have agreed with Modood’s (or, for that matter, Parekh’s) political position on multiculturalism.⁷ And, indeed, there has been a great deal of philosophical disagreement on that topic (see, for instance, Barry, 2001).

In places, Modood seems to suggest an alternative model for how a normative orientation on the part of sociologists could be justified: that what is rationally desirable can be determined through a process of dialogue amongst the various parties with an interest in a policy issue; normative sociologists engaging with local communities in this process, on the lookout for ‘intimations’ about how agreement could be reached. Here, the application of universal principles to specific issues is negotiated, through ‘iterative contextualism’ (Modood & Thompson, 2018). However, rather than such dialogue approximating to Habermas’s ‘ideal speech situation’, which would in prin-

⁴ It should also be pointed out that neither of Abbott’s alternatives – the canonical and the legalist – could be replacements for the dualist or the monist positions: they would have to be attached to modified versions of one or other of these. Abbott seems to attach them to a monist view, but I will later show that they could usefully contribute to a dualist approach.

⁵ Nor could we assume that a dialogue between sociologists and political philosophers would remedy the situation, given that sociologists are at least as divided in their political orientations.

⁶ Furthermore, Strauss rejected modern social science (see Behnegar, 2003) so that, on the face of it, there is little scope for interdisciplinary collaboration in this case.

⁷ See Turner, 2008 on Oakeshott’s conservatism.

ciple provide some hope that the result would be rationally justifiable, as Modood (2020) recognises what is involved is closer to a political process that could involve street demonstrations, passive resistance, and perhaps even threats of violence or actual violence on the part of some of those involved. While this is a more realistic view than that of Habermas, the ‘dialogue’ involved does not seem to offer any prospect that it will produce the rationally just outcome hoped for. The only possible source of such a guarantee I can think of would be through an appeal to the idea of a teleological social dialectic, in the manner of Mannheim, but it is hard to defend that idea (Hammersley, 2022a).⁸

There is a deep underlying problem here: while we can reasonably assume that there are single correct answers to factual questions, that we may be able to answer some of them fairly conclusively, and that social scientists have distinctive skills in being able to do this, we cannot legitimately make these assumptions about value questions. Very often, it is all too clear that there are several, reasonable but conflicting, answers to these, deriving from discrepant value assumptions and/or from differential priority given to particular values (Rawls, 1996:Intro). While social scientists may have greater access to some of the factual evidence relevant to answering a value question, and possess greater skill than others in evaluating this, other people will have better access to other relevant information through personal experience and specialised occupational knowledge. Furthermore, when it comes to deciding which values are relevant in making an evaluation, and what relative priority should be assigned to these, social scientists do not have distinctive expertise. Furthermore, while political philosophers may have greater understanding of the value concepts involved, along with their implications, even they are not in a better position than anyone else to apply value assumptions in evaluating particular cases. To put it bluntly, academics are not better placed than others to make practical value judgments: there is usually a wide range of relevant background experience, knowledge, virtues, and skills that facilitate such judgments, and academics by no means have a monopoly on these. Indeed, there is even a possibility that they have a trained incapacity for making practical decisions, analogous to that attributed to bureaucrats by Merton (1968:ch8; Hammersley, 2002:ch3).

This relates to a central assumption of an important form of liberalism, what Rawls (1996) has called ‘political liberalism’: that in matters of religion and morality there are no means by which a rational consensus can be brought about, that discrepant views must be tolerated; albeit within limits. The notion of normative social science seems to be at odds with this kind of liberalism, and also with the liberal democratic notion of a public sphere in which citizens participate as equals in discussing problems and policies. Sociologists can legitimately provide factual information that citizens ought to take into account, but, for the reasons already explained, any attempt by them to suggest that their research validates value conclusions about what is wrong or what should be done is not only ill-founded but amounts to a kind of scientism that threatens to distort public discussion.

⁸ Modood’s concept of ‘iterative contextualism’ does share something in common with Mannheim’s ‘relationalism’, which perhaps reflects the remote influence of Hegel through Oakeshott’s debt to British idealism (Uberoi, 2021).

Moreover, given that there seems to be no basis on which value questions can be given a single definitive answer, normative sociologists are likely to find themselves supporting conflicting political orientations, not just in the public sphere but also within the academy (Hammersley, 2017). This is already exemplified in some fields of sociological research. And, apart from anything else, it undercuts whatever coherence the discipline still possesses.

In summary, then, the fundamental problem with these proposals for normative sociology is that they fail to address the key question of how sociologists are to justify normative conclusions. Those putting them forward have not shown that there is no difference between how we justify factual and value statements, that value conclusions can be derived from factual premisses alone (as claimed by Marxism, and critical realism: see Hammersley, 2009), or that sociologists have distinctive access to a rational means of deciding which value principles are relevant on any particular occasion, the priorities amongst these, and how they should be interpreted.⁹

In the course of their promotion of normative sociology, Abbott, Sass, and Modood only mention and summarily dismiss what was at one time a very influential view: that sociology must be ‘value-free’ or ‘value-neutral’, as proposed in the methodological writings of Weber (1949, 2012). I will suggest that dismissal of this is a mistake.

Back to Weber

As noted earlier, Abbott claims that what he calls ‘the dualist position’ is equivalent to ‘Weber’s value free position’ (Abbott, 2018:159). He makes a variety of claims about this position: that it assumes ‘that science and values can be separated and that scientific study exists to assist normative actors in the real world to accomplish their ends, whatever those ends might be’ (p171), that it promotes ‘a sociology that is purely “scientific”, with no account taken of values’ (Abbott, 2018:160 Note 3), that under this orientation sociologists take their problems from external sources, such as funders (p166), that ‘it is very much a Western position’ (p166), that it is ‘intensely presentist, studying mainly individual outcomes in the present or the relatively short-term future’ (p167), and that ‘it seems to have little or no ability to address issues of cultural diversity’ (p167). None of these criticisms is accurate in the case of Weber. Instead, what Abbott seems to have in mind is Burawoy’s notions of ‘professional’ and (especially) ‘policy’ sociology (Burawoy, 2005; Abbott, 2018:160).

Briefly responding to these charges:

- Weber certainly believed that evaluative claims can be *distinguished* from factual ones, but he insisted that the knowledge produced by social science should be *value-relevant*. In this respect values play a key role in it, even though this is distinct from the one they play in normative sociology.

⁹ There is also a failure to recognise the different requirements that ought to operate in the academy and the public sphere: see Hammersley, 2005.

- It is certainly true that the knowledge produced by social scientists committed to ‘value-neutrality’ is open to use by anyone, but the same is true of the work of normative sociologists.
- Normative sociologists are just as likely to ‘take their problems from external sources’, even if perhaps different ones.
- Normative sociology, for example under the influence of Marxism, emerged in the West, as did Weber’s methodological ideas; though this does not necessarily imply that either is intrinsically ‘Western’. Furthermore, a scientific orientation can be found historically outside the West, even if this has been neglected by Eurocentric accounts of the origin of science, just as an insistence that facts and values cannot be separated is central to some traditions within the West, not just religious ones but also, for example, the political philosophy of Strauss (1953), a major critic of Weber.
- Weber’s work was not ‘intensely presentist’ and did not focus on ‘individual outcomes’, and it certainly addressed ‘cultural diversity’, even if not in the way that Abbott has in mind.

Similarly, Abbott’s criticism of dualism on the grounds that it is impossible to sustain ‘because all social actors inevitably have value commitments’ and ‘because the entire social process consists in large part of the detritus of present and past value decisions’ (p160) does not hold. Weber was, of course, all too aware that people act on the basis of values, and he showed that their actions can be investigated without the researcher evaluating these. The effect of neglecting the distinctive position offered by Weber is to forego the opportunity to compare the sort of normative sociology that Abbott recommends with a genuine alternative.

Sass does not refer to Weber’s concept of value neutrality or value freedom; and Coleman (1974:742) simply indicates his rejection of it. However, Modood does discuss it. He comments that: ‘For Weber, values enter social science simply in the choice of subject matter, say employment rather than the family, or poverty rather than racial inequality, but they are separate from the scientific study of any of those topics.’ (Modood, 2020: 32). And, against this, he argues that: ‘[...] all social science presupposes frameworks/perspectives because any inquiry must have a frame’ (Modood, 2020:32), and that these frameworks involve values. Here, like Abbott, Modood fails to give sufficient weight to Weber’s distinction between adopting a normative orientation and relying on a value-relevance framework. The latter does indeed set the frame of inquiry, but is not to be used to evaluate the phenomena being investigated.

It is true, of course, that some of the words that sociologists use to refer to social phenomena are often taken to carry evaluative as well as factual connotations, and that the difference between these is often neglected. Abbott (2018:160) points out how ‘inequality’ is often treated, even by sociologists, as implying injustice. But while particular inequalities may be selected for investigation because they are widely believed to be inequitable, this does not require sociologists to assume their injustice; and, from a Weberian point of view, they should not do so in their work. This would run the risk of closing off avenues of investigation that ought to be explored. For example, ethnic inequalities in social outcomes may be a product of discrimina-

tion (another term that can be used in a factual as well as an evaluative way), but it may also be a product of differences in aspirations, motivation, or cultural resources. Whether the latter are unjust is a much more challenging issue than the case of direct negative discrimination, and the two should not be assimilated, as they frequently are, for example in use of the concept of ‘structural racism’ (Hammersley, 2020:ch7). Much research on educational inequalities, for instance, automatically takes these to be inequitable, and tends to assume that they are a product of discrimination, direct or indirect, on the part of teachers. Moreover, it frequently does this on the basis of weak evidence (see Foster et al., 1996).

In short, what Abbott and Modood say about Weber’s position is inaccurate in places and also incomplete: it misses the subtlety of his position. Given this, it is perhaps necessary to outline that position briefly here.¹⁰ Weber distinguishes between the question of whether factual and value arguments are distinct from that of whether social scientists should put forward value conclusions in teaching and research. He argues that the first is a logical matter: factual arguments rely entirely on factual premisses (even if their relevance is defined by value assumptions), whereas value conclusions depend upon *both* factual and value premisses. And he argues that, while we can agree that value judgments should be derived in a logically consistent way from fundamental value principles, the selection of principles, and judgments about their relative priority, are not a matter of logic or science. He recognises that a reasonable case could be made for social scientists putting forward their own evaluations, but he insists that, if this is agreed, *all* political views must be allowed expression. Furthermore, the distinction between facts and values must be clearly indicated, so that there can be no pretence that value conclusions have been drawn entirely from research findings.

In places Weber implies that commitment to one set of values as against another, for example nationalism versus pacifism, is necessarily a non-rational decision. And he insists that we must respect those who consistently adopt a different value complex from our own, even though we may have to battle against them in the political realm. While I believe he is certainly correct that there can be irreconcilable disagreements about values even among reasonable people, I think he adopts too agonistic an attitude towards these (Hammersley, 2022b). To a large extent, within the West, and indeed beyond, we all share a fairly common set of values, despite disagreements in how these should be interpreted and applied in particular cases. And this allows scope for negotiation and compromise: as Rawls, Parekh, and Modood recognise. But the key point for Weber is that, while science may be able to assist in this process, it has no means of definitively resolving value disputes; nor is there a single rational answer to value questions. Furthermore, acting as if social science can provide such an answer potentially threatens political freedom and democracy.

Of course misunderstanding or misrepresenting Weber’s position is by no means rare. And this is encouraged by the terminology that Weber himself used: ‘value-free’ is thoroughly misleading, and ‘value-neutral’ is not much better. But Weber’s (2004) notion of science as a vocation that has different requirements from politics as a vocation highlights the distinctive task of social scientists, one that is achievable but at the

¹⁰ For an excellent, detailed, account of Weber’s position, see Bruun, 2007.

same time by no means easy: to produce value-relevant knowledge. Foregoing the much more difficult goal of trying to resolve value disputes is essential to facilitate tackling this more limited task effectively. Moreover, social scientists cannot claim distinctive authority in resolving value disputes; nor, generally speaking, can they make much of a contribution to this. While it is true that they will have more access than some to relevant factual evidence that bears on these disputes, they will not have access to all relevant information. Similarly, while political philosophers may have more understanding of the logical grammar of key value concepts, this does not enable them to make better judgments about how those values should be applied in particular situations. Even if normative sociologists can combine both of these sorts of expertise, and the possibility of this is questionable, it would still not mean that they have all of the resources necessary to decide what is most desirable in any situation.

The driving force behind the value-laden sociology that prevails in many quarters today seems to be twofold: first, a desire on the part of many social scientists to ‘make a difference’ in the world, rather than simply adding to a body of knowledge; and, second, demands on the part of many external audiences for social science to offer solutions to problems. Both are very understandable, but they not only rely on an overestimation of the capabilities of social science, but also on an overly optimistic conception of the scope for successful political change: Oakeshott (1962) was not wrong about this. I suspect that the problem with Weber’s position for many sociologists today is that they judge it as too unappealing to be correct, and therefore it is largely ignored. But those are not good grounds for rejecting it. Furthermore, the importance of factual knowledge needs to be championed in what is now increasingly a ‘post-truth’ world (Hammersley, 2023b).

Conclusion

Abbott, Sass, and Modood are to be applauded for highlighting the ‘crypto-normative’ character of much sociology, and why this is unacceptable. However, in my view their search for a solution goes in precisely the wrong direction. Weber’s position is defensible whereas theirs are not. In this paper I have spelt out the reasoning behind this view. In particular, they fail to show why it can be assumed that there are single right answers to value questions, and why we should believe that social scientists and/or political philosophers have a superior capacity compared to ordinary citizens, including practitioners of other relevant occupations, for making value judgments about important social issues. Max Weber pointed to these problems a long time ago (Weber, 1974), and his solution is much more subtle than these authors allow: social science must aim to be neutral as regards practical values, only addressing factual questions, but at the same time practical values are used to determine what are worthwhile topics for investigation, thereby helping to ensure that the results are relevant to significant public issues.

If sociologists claim that they can validate value conclusions through their research this amounts to an overextension of their expertise and threatens to distort democratic regimes that are already debilitated by deep divisions and partisan attitudes. There

is a complex and tense relationship between science and practical decision-making even when scientists restrict themselves to putting forward factual conclusions, and this is greatly exacerbated when they promote normative conclusions (Hammersley, 2023c). Furthermore, the notion of academics as ‘public intellectuals’ has long been problematic (Hammersley, 2000), and is especially so today in a landscape of ‘think-tanks’ and social media ‘influencers’.

I acknowledged the pressures lying behind the tendency for sociologists to adopt a normative orientation: a laudable desire on the part of social scientists to make a practical contribution, and an understandable wish for lay people to want solutions to their problems. But giving in to these pressures leads to a betrayal of the distinctive task of sociology. Producing value-relevant knowledge about social issues is a challenging enough goal in itself, one that sociologists can only claim to have achieved with limited success. Taking on the additional task of determining what is good or right, bad or wrong, about the situations they study is an exercise in futility, in intellectual terms, and probably also in practical terms.

On a final note, it is important to add that, while I regard Abbot’s, Sass’s, and Modood’s promotion of normative sociology as misconceived, I think they are right to emphasise the need for social scientists to draw on political philosophy (Hammersley, 2006). One of its functions in relation to social science, as guided by the ideal of value neutrality, is to clarify the values that are built into value relevance frameworks. It is common for the complexities of these values, such as equity or social justice (Cooper, 1980; Frankfurt, 2015; Hammersley, 2023a), to be neglected by social scientists. To the extent that the work of Abbott, Sass, and Modood, encourages more attention to the philosophical literature on politics and ethics, they will have made a significant contribution towards improving the quality of sociological work.

Authors’ Contribution None

Data Availability Not applicable.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest statement On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval Not applicable.

Consent to participate Not applicable.

Consent for publication Not applicable.

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