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“Objectivity” in interpretative sociology

*This piece is part of [a series of brief interventions](#) based on a roundtable discussion held at the [LSE Sociology departmental conference](#) in November 2024. The conference organisers posed the question: Should sociology remain descriptive, or is engaging with normative questions essential to understand social life? The intention was to spark a conversation that would invite a shared reflection on one of sociology’s most enduring and urgent debates. Here, **Monika Krause** answers.*

We were asked to discuss the question as to whether normative sociology is possible. I begin by saying that non-normative sociology is not possible. This seems to me to be a view that has been quite widely shared for a long time. **Howard Becker** made this point in his 1967 article “Whose side are we on?” and we can go back much further in the history of sociology. I was initially asked to speak about the views of Max Weber, who is sometimes seen as advocating for sociology as an objective, value-neutral activity, but Weber would have agreed that non-normative sociology is not possible.

I note here that Weber wrote ‘objectivity’ in quotation marks throughout his key essay, a fact that has often been missed by both “fans” and critics of Weber’s claimed position. Weber writes these quotation marks in “‘Objectivity’ in social scientific knowledge” in 1904. The quotation marks, which mark objectivity as a problem area rather than a claim, are not (only) a product of current concerns with ‘positionality’ and ‘standpoints’, of postmodernism or of the sociology of scientific knowledge and of science and technology studies. They are foundational to the social sciences as they arose in dialogue with 19th century historicism.

So the question becomes what kind of normative sociology do we practice, or rather how does a sociologist when doing research deal with the normative issues involved in choosing a project, asking a question, collecting materials, looking at materials and generating findings and stories? It is important to note that the values at stake are **multiple** and sometimes **competing** as

philosophers of science have pointed out; some of them are specific to academic practice and some are values in the social world at large.

The issues of values in the social world arises in specific terms for interpretative sociologists, who have to acknowledge and always be mindful that the world that is studied is pre-interpreted. It does not just have a meaning, and a normativity, but many meanings and normativities, which are an essential part of what we are trying to understand.

I would argue that it has been foundational for interpretative cultural research and indeed for the project of critique to consider the possibility of bracketing of first order normativity when doing research to enable a specific kind of observation that would not arise without this bracketing. STS scholars debate this as the principle of symmetry – **to explain true knowledge with the same methods as false** – which is a sort of bracketing of the truth claim itself – but this is much older.

I would claim that we find versions of this when we find **art historians** in the 19th century saying that the task of art history and archaeology was to study all of art, not only beautiful art. We find it in the origins of the sociology of religions, which abandons the distinction between primitive “superstition” and true religion and becomes more open in its observations and comparative.

Symmetry in that sense, the active operation of bracketing the normativity in distinctions loaded with everyday normativity, is not value-free. It is a very specific practice that is not always the wrong thing to do. It leads to new constructivist concepts and is, most fundamentally, based on the normative hypothesis that there might be distinctive contributions to be made in these areas with such concepts; they are characterised by a specific relationship to in-the-world normativity, creating a distance in order to pay attention to variation in the way phenomena are constructed by actors in the world.

Sociologists have, for example, bracketed the distinction between “true” and “false” knowledge to study “knowledge production”. They have proposed a **sociology of settlement**, to go beyond the urban/rural dichotomy and they have advanced **the study of networks of care and kinship** to open up analytical perspectives beyond the implicit opposition between the (nuclear) family on the one hand and anomie on the other hand.

It is not possible to actively depart from all in-the-world normativities at the same time. This is partly because we are still using the languages of the world and are not replacing every word with specialised terminologies (though this has sometimes been a fantasy in the history of a range of scientific disciplines). Bracketing is usually limited to the epistemic target and a few other terms key to specific traditions. Trade-offs occur between all the different values at stake, including ‘clarity’; I would say much of research methods, skilled writing and self-editing is managing these trade-offs.

This practice of bracketing is ongoing, but can be somewhat cumulative, such as in the move from a symmetrical sociology of religions to a comparative sociology that is symmetrical with regard to

the distinction between religion and secularism, which Asad and others have pioneered.

This practice of bracketing has always faced scandalisation, and as part of this sociology has faced scandalization. "Science as culture", is now a journal with a high impact factor; I am pretty sure it was intended and also received as a real provocation when the journal was founded. Before "science as culture" was a provocation, the idea of "culture" as "culture" was attacked as relativistic and amoral.

It is interesting to read criticism of Durkheim by scholars associated with the clerical and literary establishment at his time. For intellectuals on the right, sociology and the humanities are associated with a shift from inquiries into "good" and "evil" to a study of "values". In the first decades after his death, Weber and indeed sociology as a whole was critiqued on these terms from the right, and from proponents of natural rights. It was also attacked for its "neutralism" and "relativism" by Lukacs from the left in ways that aim almost exactly at the practice of symmetry as described.

In response to the question "Is normative sociology possible?", I argued that non-normative sociology is not possible. It now occurs to me that maybe that was a cop out. Another reading of the question, which I now don't have the space to respond to in detail, would be: "Can sociology tell us what to do?"

In answering this version of the question, I could again start with Weber, who of course said: "No. Social science cannot tell us what to do." I want to note that he held the position that science, in the German more encompassing sense of "Wissenschaft", and politics are to some extent separate pursuits not only and not even mainly to protect "science" from politics but also to protect politics from science. Like many critical sociologists of science and expertise later on, Weber saw the problems that arise for political freedom and for politics as a process of intersubjective negotiation when politics and science are collapsed.

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