

## Civic Sociology

# Bristol School of Multiculturalism as Normative Sociology

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The Bristol School of Multiculturalism is a political theory/sociology interdisciplinary approach to its subject matter, which has been described as a form of normative sociology. It is normative in the way that a lot of critical social theory (e.g., Foucauldian) is not and is not merely “deconstructive” but also a constructive engagement with the concerns of co-citizens. It, however, 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. However, unlike some other activist-oriented perspectives or standpoints, it is neither antistate nor antinational but is guided by a sense of inclusive unity or the common good. Essential to this unity is “recognition” and institutional, not merely symbolic, accommodation of minorities and a perspective on the “multi” which goes beyond the black-white binary and a secularist exclusion of political claims-making by religious and ethnoreligious groups such as Muslims in western Europe. Critically, the Bristol School of Multiculturalism is not just normative in that it does normative sociology, but most importantly, it engages in political theory to justify its normative perspective against objections and rival normative positions. So, the Bristol School of Multiculturalism is perhaps not just a normative sociology but also a form of normative sociological theory.

## INTRODUCTION

In March 2019 I gave a lecture at the British Academy on Islamophobia in which I wanted to characterise my approach to sociology (Modood 2020). I called it “normative sociology,” the core feature of which was that it was an interdisciplinary combination of normative sociology and political theory. It was only two years later—when *Public Sociology* circulated a call for papers for a special issue on normative sociology—that I discovered that a debate had emerged, especially in the United States, using this very term, “normative sociology,” to discuss how sociology should have a normative character.

What was characterised as normative sociology drew upon political commitments such as feminism or antiracism and so in some ways was very familiar and mainstream (at least in Britain, where to call oneself a feminist sociologist, for example, is not an unusual self-description). While such sociology clearly has a normative character and is explicitly politically interventionist and intended to change, subvert, or disrupt some aspect of society, it is not in full what I meant by “normative sociology” because it mainly *applied* normative ideas to understand aspects of society, how it worked, including how oppression operated, how it could be changed, and so on. But it did not examine and justify the normative ideas it applied. Normative soci-

ology proper should do both: it should *justify* the normative ideas it deploys.

This was not absent in the American discussion I mentioned, which included proposals to better connect sociology to political theory. When I wrote my British Academy lecture in March 2019 (which led to Modood 2020), I did both a Google Scholar and a general Google search using the term “normative sociology,” and I got nothing interesting at all even though I now see that a relevant paper by Andrew Abbott was published as online advance in January 2018. Having drawn an empty net, I did not do any more searches and just assumed I was doing something alone (and, as some colleagues told me, pursuing an oxymoron).

I am, then, very pleased to see that Abbot’s piece was part of a journal special issue, which also includes an article by Jensen Sass (2018), that speaks directly to my aspirations. Abbott (2018) rightly argues that sociology should try to create an explicit but rigorously argued normative sub-discipline. He argues that it should do so by combining two approaches, what he calls the “canonical” and the “legalist” positions. The canonical approach would enjoy the status that political theory has in political science and would be organized around a classical canon of normative works. The legalist approach would grow out of new genres of writing that aim at the systematic normative evaluation of bodies of work or literatures. Together they would challenge soci-

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ological work to think about its conscious and unconscious political assumptions by evaluating them against more systematic normative theorising (Abbott 2018). Sass (2018) supports this view but suggests that the proposal seems to be more about the nature of sociology at a meta level and leaves unclear what individual sociologists should be doing in their own work and so offers more concrete guidance on how sociologists can make their empirical work more normative. I do not want to discuss either of these two sets of recommendations but want to approach the topic by explaining what I understand by normative sociology and the forms it takes in my work on multiculturalism.<sup>1</sup>

## NORMATIVE SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY IN THE BRISTOL SCHOOL

Multiculturalism is a normative political theory, some key exponents of which are Taylor (1994), Kymlicka (1995), and Parekh ([2000] 2006). Multiculturalism is also a sociological theme as found in numerous studies that focus on ethnic minorities, their identities, and how such groups are disadvantaged or oppressed, experience racism—including structural racism—and resist, and that generally seek to give voice to groups that have relatively little voice or power in mainstream public spaces, political or cultural. Typically, these two sets of disciplinary inquiries, multiculturalist political theory and multiculturalist sociology, are pursued independently of each other. However, there is an approach that combines these two distinct exercises. It has been referred to as the Bristol School of Multiculturalism (BSM) and includes scholars such as Bhikhu Parekh, myself, Nasar Meer, and Varun Uberoi (amongst others) (Levey 2019 and the consequent symposium). Sociological work on multiculturalism—as also in feminism, sexualities, class, migration studies, and so on—is normative in the sense that it favours and disfavors certain kinds of politics and sees itself as making a political contribution, it is not neutral and typically exhibits its normative commitments on its sleeve and often takes the form of advocacy. However, I am talking about something that goes beyond that level of normative sociology towards what we might call *normative sociological theory*, and so, as it were, takes normative sociology to a higher intellectual level. I like to think that I am an exponent of normative sociology and so wish to justify its presence in sociology, but I also want to go further with that intellectual thrust. If normative sociology uses normative concepts, normative sociological theory does that too, and additionally, it 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 (this might be close to what Abbott 2018 is hoping for in sociology). This necessarily means that it goes be-

yond descriptive or explanatory sociology to critically examine the normative nature of the concepts and seeks to improve the normative arguments that are at stake. I will use my own work to illustrate what I mean by normative sociology and normative sociological theory.

Aspects of Normative Sociology:

1. Looks for norms and political goals that are operative in a sociopolitical phenomenon and their discursive representation and contestation, not just a materialist explanation in terms of causality, mechanisms, and structures. This includes identifying and exposing negative norms and discourse such as racial discrimination as well as justifiable norms—say, individualism, racial equality, or sense(s) of community.
2. In relation to the operative norms and political goals, offers not just negative or “deconstructive” critique but supplements that by suggesting what is better than what exists and how the situation can be improved (or at least not made worse)—not necessarily at the level of policy details but at least at the level of normative reasoning. In theorising about real-world cases, I am not merely “problematizing” or “deconstructing” them but pointing to feasible, contextually sensitive solutions. The aim is to be constructive, not just deconstructive or analytical (Dobbernack and Modood 2015, 2022; cf. Fraser 1981).
3. Uses concepts that distinguish between what is negative and not a normative contribution in any discourses and, on the other hand, what is or can be converted into a normative contribution—that is, what consists of reasonable criticism that can be part of a dialogue/multilogue in which criticism is given and taken. So, avoids a conscious or unconscious binary, which simply presents in terms of, say, racism and antiracism, and where there is no scope for learning from opposed intellectual and political perspectives; where majoritarian views have nothing positive to offer and one-sided advocacy is regarded as adequate.
4. Is a political theory examination of the normative concepts used or assumed in one’s sociology, including responding to theoretical objections and engaging with rival positions, conceptual and political (i.e., not simply ignoring them or dismissing them as not worthy of engagement).
5. Uses a method that can be characterised as “iterative contextualism.” It is an approach that is not tied to a single national context or political tradition or culture, but it gives significant weight to these contexts and cultures in its theorising. It insists that political ideas and ‘isms’, including the principles of academic political theory, get their meaning from the contexts they have been extrapolated out of or engaged with. The concept of liberty, for example, has similar but

<sup>1</sup> Amongst European sociologists and social theorists, I feel an affinity with the work of Veit Bader, Rainer Baubock, and Christian Joppke in that they too combine sociology and normative argument in relation to issues of minorities and equality, but none of them is a multiculturalist or would self-describe themselves as normative sociologists.

different meanings in the United States, France, and Britain. A theorist whose thinking was formed in one of these contexts would reflect that context. When they apply their concept to one of the other countries, they would have an imperfect understanding of that context, or they could productively revise their concept of liberty. Doing the latter is clearly the way forward, but it means that the engagement with the new context has changed the concept. Indeed, every engagement with a context—every time the concept of liberty is taken on an outing—the concept will have to undergo some change to reflect the cross-contextual variety. Thus, even abstract principles such as liberty are reflective of the contexts that have been engaged with. So, the search for generality is hollow unless it is about accommodating the richness of contextual differences rather than abstracting them (Modood and Thompson 2017).<sup>2</sup>

6. Includes public intellectual engagement with one's fellow citizens. This may be an optional extra for sociology, but is it optional for normative sociology?

Let me give some examples. I have, from a very early point in my entry into this field, done work on employment (Modood 1991; Modood et al. 1997; Khattab and Modood 2015) and on entry into higher education (Modood 1993; Shiner and Modood 2002; Modood 2004). In this work, I have sought to bring out issues of equal opportunities and unequal outcomes. This is consistent with a racial or socioeconomic equality framework. I have, however, consistently sought to display the multiculturalist character of the issues, showing how different minorities pursue different strategies or target different occupations and can possess advantages as well as disadvantages. This has meant highlighting racial discrimination, institutional racism, and socioeconomic disadvantages by race and ethnicity, but also highlighting that ethnic groups have their own agency and distinctive strategies and orientations, including differential sets of preferences, which can lead to certain educational/employment choices being prized above others, resulting in uneven presence in different occupations (Modood, Metcalf, and Virdee 1998; Modood 2004; Modood and Khattab 2016). To bring out the latter, I have developed the concept of “ethnic capital,” a form of capital that an ethnic group poor in economic capital or mainstream social capital may still be rich in, specifically in relation to the attainment of qualifications and entry into higher education (Modood 2004), and also in the avoidance of unemployment (Modood and Khattab 2016). The work, then, is a multiculturalist engagement with structural inequalities in employment and entry to higher education rather than simply an antiracist one and so brings together issues of racialization and socioeconomic disadvantage with ethnic minority identity and agency. I offer this as an example

of normative multiculturalist sociology because it does not connect the sociology to a larger theory or multiculturalist concepts such as recognition or to the question of how to unite an egalitarian recognition with an egalitarian redistributive equality (Parekh 2004; Honneth and Fraser 2003).

Having said that, I might qualify it slightly by saying that I was a coauthor of the prominent Commission on Multiethnic Britain report (CMEB 2000), which, insofar as a nonacademic publication can, offered an intellectual perspective on multicultural British citizenship and within that argued that ethnic equality is not possible with large socioeconomic inequalities. As the commission's chair, Professor Lord Bhikhu Parekh, stated in the preface to our report: “*The principle of equal moral worth cannot take root and flourish with a structure of deep economic or social inequalities*” (CMEB 2000 viii). I offer this as not just a connecting of my normative sociology with a more theoretical normative position, but also as an example of intellectual public engagement. In relation to the latter, I contrast my understanding of a public intellectual, whose rootedness and commitments can be critical to giving voice to and addressing the concerns and protests of subordinate groups, with that offered by Edward Said's more romantic portrayal of a public intellectual as “an exile” (Modood 2019, chap. 12). Similar to my concern about contextualised theory, I contend that out-and-out “outsider” status is not a good basis for multicultural public intellectual engagement, in which one's commitment to certain peoples and society can be the basis for moderating conflict. My point is that commitments to groups, people, causes, institutions, one's country, and so on are not incidental to an engaged public intellectual or a nuisance it would be best did not exist. They are as essential to the public intellectual—who has to care about a people, a place, or a cause and not just about being an intellectual (brought out nicely in relation to George Orwell and Albert Camus in Walzer 2002)—as the commitment to intellectual integrity.

Let me now offer an example of what I consider to be normative sociological theory or contextualized political theory and of the other items on my list above. It is clear that western European states are now highly exercised by the challenges posed by postimmigration ethnoreligious diversity and that the new Muslim settlements of the last fifty years or so are at the centre of it. I believe I have been one of the first to argue that this requires new thinking, not only about questions of social integration but also about the role of religion in relation to the state and citizenship. Accordingly, a fundamental issue that many thought had long been settled reemerges with new vitality and controversy—namely, political secularism, especially as it articulates with questions of tolerance, recognition, and governance. However, unlike others who speak of the “postsecular” or a “crisis of secularism,” I have argued that this rethinking of secularism is, at least in western Europe,

<sup>2</sup> For political theory methodological discussions of my concept of moderate secularism, see Lægaard 2008, 2009, and 2015, and Modood 2009.

crucially to do with the reality of *multiculturalism*. By which I mean not just the fact of new ethno-religious diversity but the presence of a multiculturalist approach to this diversity: the idea that equality must be extended from uniformity of treatment to include respect for difference; recognition of public/private interdependence rather than a dichotomy as in classical liberalism; the public recognition and institutional accommodation of minorities; the reversal of marginalisation and a remaking of national citizenship so that all can have a sense of belonging to it. This multiculturalist challenge, at one time seen to go with the flow of liberalism—of human rights, racial equality, decomposition of collectivities such as the nation—is properly understood as requiring not just the reform and extension of liberal democratic institutions but a rethinking of liberalism. These are the themes of my *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism* (2019). In that work I not only draw upon my earlier theory of political multiculturalism (Modood [2007] 2013) but also offer a distinctive account of western European secularism in terms of political norms and institutional arrangements and go on to theorise how that can be “multiculturalised” (Modood 2019).<sup>3</sup> My point is that to accept or not accept a form of political secularism will require a normative argument, and so a perspective such as Orientalism or anti-Islamophobia is incomplete without normative argument. The kind of normative disavowal that one finds in the influential work of, say, Talal Asad (1993, 2003) leaves us adrift. He has been a powerful force for getting us to rethink secularism, especially how secularism is not “neutral” but shapes and constrains religion, even what is thought of as religion. Yet his conceptual framework weakly distinguishes between different modes of political secularism and does not explicitly help us to determine whether secularism is a good thing, or which version of secularism is better than another, something that I

believe one has a right to expect from normative sociological theory. Asad has consistently denied that his work is normative and argued that it is merely analytical and genealogical (1993, 23–25), but as his thesis is that secularism is to be understood less in terms of freedom and more in terms of control and the formation of religious believers and sensibilities acceptable to secularists, there plainly is an implicit normativity for anyone who values freedom (including presumably Asad). The central task of normative sociology is to make the normative in any sociology or social theory explicit and to justify it by engaging with rival positions and normative enquiry in general.

I hope that in this short piece, I have given some idea of what I understand by normative sociology and by normative sociological theory and why I think the former is better done when it is combined with the latter, and how this is sometimes done. In doing so, I have pointed to aspects of my work, and of the Bristol School of Multiculturalism more generally. In my own work, normative sociology and normative sociological theory are closely tied to a particular theoretical position, multiculturalism, but I would like to think that its value goes beyond that. Bringing critical, normative reflection to bear upon the concepts we use is, I believe, of value to sociology in general. Being more explicit about one’s normative presuppositions and drive is also a good basis for intellectual engagement with, and offering some leadership on, the concerns of one’s fellow citizens.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more global perspective, see Modood and Sealy (2022).

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