

Civic Sociology

Normative Sociology in the Bristol School of Multiculturalism: An Interview with Tariq Modood

Tariq Modood^{1 a}, Elisabeth Becker^{2 b}

¹ University of Bristol, Bristol, UK, ² Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany

Keywords: multiculturalism, normative sociology, public intellectual, Britain, Bristol

<https://doi.org/10.1525/cs.2022.57498>

Civic Sociology

In this interview, Elisabeth Becker interviews Tariq Modood about his understanding of and contribution to normative sociology. Professor Modood describes his personal and professional trajectory, culminating in his leadership of the Bristol School of Multiculturalism. This school unites sociology and political theory to ask pressing questions about British society (and beyond) regarding migration, diversity, and inclusion. In this interview, Professor Modood further draws attention to the need for an explicit "big N" Normative Sociology, where the scholar's aims for the betterment of society are made explicit and argued for; where subjectivity is seen not as a weakness but as a component for both critiquing and transforming the societies in which we live.

Elisabeth Becker: Thank you, Professor Tariq Modood, for joining me in this conversation about the essay that you have written for *Civic Sociology*, which is focusing on "Normative Sociology" in this special issue. What I would like to discuss with you today is normative sociology and its relationship to the Bristol School of Multiculturalism.

Tariq Modood: Yes, I'm very pleased to be part of your special issue of *Civic Sociology*, and I'm very happy to have this conversation.

EB: I would like to begin for those who are interested in normative sociology, which has many shades and variations. So many ideas have been put forward in recent years about what normative sociology is. What is the approach that you have, and how have you come to develop it?

TM: I think one of the things that has been developing in sociology for quite a long time, a few decades, is that scholars, researchers, have what you might call "committed" or "engaged" positions. I think actually this used to be the case even before, in relation specifically to class perspectives, but it's become more explicit with the rise of feminist approaches, various kinds of antiracism, and sexualities and so on. Having said that, very few people use the term "normative" in sociology to describe what they're doing or to think through whether there's a particular kind of sociology that has that character.

I started using the term very recently. I think the first time I used it was in a lecture I gave to the British Academy in March 2019. When I was writing that lecture and thinking about how I want to offer a characterisation of my view—the specific lecture was about Islamophobia—I

wanted to explain what was my kind of method, or, if you like, philosophical angle in the field. I did a Google Scholar search and a Google search using the two words "normative sociology," and nothing really came up.

Since then, I've seen that there are some people—there's a special issue in an American journal, for instance—by whom normative sociology is being explicitly named and discussed, but most of the people I referred to a moment ago in feminist sociology, critical race theory, and so on—they don't talk about themselves as being "normative." I think that's a shame for two reasons. Firstly, they quite clearly are normative, even when they say they are not. Secondly, by saying they're doing something else, it means that they don't fully elaborate their normative position and therefore properly examine and justify it. They end up therefore taking it for granted, and their critical engagement is more with people they disagree with or social phenomena they want to critique, and while that's obviously necessary and part of any perspective, I think self-criticism is also a very important part of the academic enterprise.

If you don't use a term like "normative," then you don't ask yourself: well, what is it that I'm committed to, what is it I'm presupposing? Some form of equality—let's say gender equality or racial equality—but what does that mean? How would I justify that relative to a number of other approaches? That's exactly what people in normative political theory do. So I think that we need to connect with the forms of reasoning, of argument construction, as well as, if you like, deconstruction, critical arguments that take apart various positions in normative political theory. Because my own work combines those two disciplines, sociology and

a T.Modood@bristol.ac.uk

b becker.elisabeth@gmail.com

political theory, I thought: well, maybe I'll call this "normative sociology."

I could call it other things. In the past, I might have called it a "contextualised political theory," because then the context refers to what you might call "the sociological empirical dimension"—the fact that I'm talking about a particular country or a particular group or a particular phenomenon, and political theory referring to the normative engagement with that phenomenon. On this occasion, I would like to flag the term "normative sociology." While I agree with you that we now do have at least one or two generations of people who are doing normative sociology with a small "n," very few embrace the term. I would say many aren't even familiar with the term.

The term that's most often used to describe these kinds of approaches is "critical." They say they're doing "critical feminist sociology," they're doing "critical security studies," "critical religious studies," and so on. I think the kind of criticality that I aspire to myself and would like to see others aspire to, so we aspire to it together as a community, is what I might call "Socratic." Socrates was very critical of other people. As we all know, he drove people mad by asking them lots of questions until they got very angry and usually stomped off. He'd say: "Oh, that's interesting, you say this is justice, but here, listen to what I've got to say, and you'll see that your argument falls apart." Yet, at the same time, he was very self-critical.

I prefer the term "normative" because we do have normative arguments, positions, and commitments, and there's nothing wrong with that whatsoever—just the opposite. I think we need to bring them out in the open, and we need to show how they are informed by, but also inform, the search for empirical data, for evidence, because you don't know what you're looking for until you have, you know, some kind of a framework of inquiry. I take the term "normative sociology" really to be aspiring to, pointing to, a truly critical sociology rather than a sociology that's critical about something other than itself.

EB: This makes me think of some of your more public-facing work. You've done a lot of public work, and I wonder how you think this connects to this kind of normative sociology?

TM: Yes, Elisabeth, it is interesting—even though we think of sociology as one discipline—how different national cultures work in relation to this question about what we might call public sociology or the public engagement of sociologists. So my understanding of the United States is that actually you do have quite a lot of publicly engaged, very senior social science and humanities scholars, in particular historians, lawyers, and political scientists, but this tends to be at a very elite level. So, you know, some professors at Harvard and the Kennedy School are people who have served in the White House or who have served in some other federal agency or are advisors and so on, and you know, after their president loses an election, they go back to university and so on. It does happen in the US, but it's considered basically a kind of elite personnel issue. Some-

times there's a kind of revolving door between the White House and Ivy League universities.

That's not the case in Britain. We don't do it like that at all, nor do we do it like France, or at least how France used to do it. I think French "public intellectualism" has changed quite a lot, you know, from the famous days of people like Sartre and so on—even, you know, people like Foucault or Bourdieu. You now have fewer university-based leading scholars who are routinely engaged in talking to French citizens, public intellectuals. You, of course, do have some, and some of them tend to be quite active in the media, but they don't have the same kind of prominence or status. So in Britain I think we've had a little bit of the kind of elite phenomenon that I said was the case in the US; they're less involved with government, more involved with public communication, like, say, the BBC or national newspapers and magazines. But in the last couple of decades, we've had a radical change which has been pushed by the government asking academics to engage in or to show that their work has what's called "impact." This is part of a national assessment. Funding depends on it. Impact here means you have to show that your research made a difference to something outside of academia. So it's not enough to say "other scholars cited my work, it's now very prominent" or that it has high Google Scholar citation scores. Impact means nonacademic impact. You have to show that a government agency or the way NHS carries out certain health cures, operations, care systems, and so on were affected by your research.

This was first resisted by British academics. Over time, because of the top-down force of this requirement, social scientists and humanities scholars have started to make their work have impact: to engage in some kind of public engagement, not necessarily with policy makers but also with think tanks, civil society advocacy groups, NGOs, ethnic minorities, women organising refuges to protect abused women who need shelter, and so on. So actually now in British universities, it is very common for academics to engage. They normally engage in terms of what you might call "how to do X." They're more interested in the causal mechanisms or the drivers of a phenomenon. So if you want more people to take a COVID vaccine, then this is how you should be reaching certain kinds of hard-to-reach, vaccine-hesitant people, like certain ethnic minorities, for instance, or poor communities. So most of it tends to be about: if you want to do this, then you should change a policy or change a modus operandi; the normativity of it is backgrounded. Of course it's presupposed, of course people are drawing on normative ideas. But they're more likely to argue like this: supposing they say that British Muslims are very distrustful of certain government agencies and programs, like to do with identifying radicalised populations, or those that are vulnerable to radicalisation, you know, some young people—they're very distrustful, and therefore they won't work with the government and its agencies, and therefore the program will get nowhere. So they'll say, "Well, actually what you need to do then is to create some consultative bodies or some joint forms of governance and have Muslims work with you. Have the local communities that you think are vulnerable, or some members who are vulnerable to

radicalisation, work with you.” If you want to achieve *X*, do it by doing *A*, *B*, and *C* because the present approach doesn’t get you to the target.

I think in British social science, now, we have quite a lot of public engagement. Most of it follows this kind of instrumental logic, and it’s not to be despised, we obviously need that kind of information. Scientists and doctors and people like that are much more used to it, and it follows the logic of their work. How to cure cancer? You do *A*, *B*, and *C* because experiments have shown that works rather than *P*, *Q*, and *R*. I support that kind of impact-oriented social science as long as it doesn’t de-intellectualise social science by making all of it all about solutions to existing government policies or priorities. I think that would be quite wrong.

So here I share the same position as those people who say there must be space for critical sociology to criticise the government and its priorities and its way of thinking. Because any policies exist within a network of policies, a web of policies, and they’re informed by larger concepts and of course priorities. So we ought to be critical and evaluative of those, and I would say my own work has this blend. Some of it takes the form of: look, if you want to have Muslims work with the government, as opposed to being alienated by the government, then do *A*, *B*, and *C* rather than *P*, *Q*, and *R*. Some of it takes that form, and some of it takes the form of: well, what is the government trying to achieve? I have a kind of multiculturalist normative framework, and so I ask myself, or I discuss with others, what the government is trying to do or what its critics prefer, is that consistent with the promotion of multicultural equality, multicultural inclusion? Is that empowering and bringing in alienated minorities, or is it indifferent to them? Or, worse still, is it having exactly the negative effect? I do both. I use normative concepts to orientate myself and my criticisms, as well as asking the questions of: well, if you want to achieve *X*, what is the best way of achieving it?

EB: Great, thank you. I’m going to now link your work, which obviously is in the foreground here, and your theoretical positionalities or way of utilising theory to think about the social world with the Bristol School of Multiculturalism. What is unique about this school? I know a lot is unique about it, but could you tell us how it brings these strands together, because I’m thinking about it as a sort of model for other places where there are attempts to do this type of sociology or social scientific work, even if they’re doing it in a bit of a different context.

TM: Yes, multiculturalism can mean lots of different things, as we all know. Nowadays it’s not a term that usually is used to denote anything positive. Which is a shame, but it’s a fact of life. I guess I use multiculturalism in a fairly distinctive way. The parallel would be with how we talk about liberalism. We have lots of political parties in different countries who call themselves “liberal.” We have one in Britain called the Liberal Democrats, Germany has a Liberal party, Australia has a Liberal party, in the United States the Democrats are sometimes called liberals—both by themselves and especially by some of their critics. Actually all those terms can mean very different things. The Lib-

eral party in Australia is quite conservative, and the Liberal party in Germany also is right of centre. Whereas liberal in the US means left of centre, it means more federal government involvement in the economy and in the regulation of social life, in particular to do with standards, like standards in the workplace, school standards, and health-care standards; that’s closer to what it means in Britain, though we may also call that social democratic or Labour. Yet those are not the predominant meanings in academia. Political theorists often call themselves liberals and call other people as having some other position, like possibly communitarian, and so on. So “liberal,” then, in political theory discussions tends to have a specific meaning and not just the same as what anyone in any country would call a liberal policy or a liberal party.

For me, multiculturalism is an outgrowth of discussions in political theory. Having said that, those discussions in political theory only started because there were certain political movements; there was some political agitation. Political movements that we often associate with the ‘60s, ‘70s, and ‘80s, new social movements, identity movements, identities to do with equality but not equality of sameness, extending equal citizenship and nondiscrimination to include equality of difference, of acceptance of difference, not equality through assimilation. So these were social and political ideas, and the Canadian government was the first one to say: “We’re going to actually do something as a policy that reflects some of these ideas and concerns, and we’re going to call it multiculturalism.” That predated the discussions in political theory because Pierre Trudeau’s government created a multiculturalism policy in 1971. Political theory discussions really got going, at least in Anglophone political theory, in the late 1980s onwards. So we do have this kind of dialectical relationship between what multiculturalism means amongst its advocates in the world, and what it means amongst those who discuss it in political theory—some of whom are advocates, some critics, and some just generally exploring it.

That’s a different meaning to what multiculturalism has come to have, because the critics have come to control the meaning, to dominate the meaning. Critics say it’s about separation, segregation, difference, not commonality. I certainly don’t say that; Pierre Trudeau certainly didn’t say that either. Multiculturalists want difference and commonality to work together in a certain kind of respectful, egalitarian way. They don’t want to work with the binary of sameness or difference. Unfortunately, multiculturalism has not been as successful politically as it might have been, perhaps because it’s just got too many opponents; the opponents have managed to impose their own critical meaning on the term, so most people nowadays are very wary of using the term “multiculturalism”—even progressive politicians in Britain, let alone in some other countries. Multiculturalism for the Bristol School also gets part of its meaning from political theory and part of its meaning from the ferment, the political agitation taking place in society and specifically Britain—not exclusively Britain, but that is the immediate context. We’ve gone through periods of emphasising antidiscrimination as the basis of racial equality but

also saying actually it's not enough just to be *anti* something. Black people have positive identities of their own, and they're asserting their identities, they're asserting their connection with certain histories and cultures, histories of origins but also histories of oppression and resistance to it.

And then another layer on top of that was the emergence of Muslim anger against the novel *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie. Of course it's not the only issue for Muslims at that time or before it or subsequently, but it's just such a high-profile issue, and it launched a Muslim angry engagement with British society which I think has also led to less angry, productive, constructive engagement with British society. Often movements are triggered by a crisis or a moment of conflict and anger, but that's hopefully not where they end. They mature and develop into something constructive—taking that point of criticism and wanting to change something into a more dialogical and constructive direction, working with other people in a democratic way and working with political parties and governments and so on. I think that's exactly what's happened to British Muslims. But taking that extra layer of Muslim identity assertion, as well as the other layers of Black identity assertion and more generally ethnic identities and that on top of antidiscrimination and anti-hate speech: I think the Bristol School of Multiculturalism is this kind of meeting point between those British experiences that I've just described—these kind of waves of protest and political agenda setting, with the debates in political theory about what does equality mean, what priority should individual rights have over group-based claims, what does citizenship mean in a context of difference, in the context of identity assertion, and above all, what is the place of religion in public life when we are happy to make gender, race, sexualities very explicit that they belong to public life? You don't have to be in the closet about any of them, you don't have to be shy about saying, "As a woman, I think X." Whereas in western societies there are some people still that think there's something wrong if you say, "As a Christian, I promote this view," or "As a Muslim, I'm criticising the government policy." So these are exactly the issues that the Bristol School of Multiculturalism has engaged with, and it's given it a distinctiveness because multiculturalism in Anglophone political theory was much more informed by Canadian and, in a different kind of way, American thinking, and this ferment, these social movements in Britain, challenged some of those ideas, directly or indirectly.

And we—and when I say "we" here, I mean above all the political theorist Bhikhu Parekh and then two people who've worked with me at Bristol and now have gone on to have eminent careers of their own, Nasar Meer and Varun Uberoi, and also some younger people that are not yet so

prominent, but hopefully they will be—we've given these political ideas this British inflection but also have done sociological research. So it's not just a matter of engaging with the political theorists, but engaging with the political theorists to give a certain character to political theory of multiculturalism which is also a basis for a research program, a whole series of research initiatives and probes, and the political theory is in turn informed by empirical research, just as it was initially informed by the political challenges that were happening in British society. So it's very sensitive to contemporary developments. Britain, I would say, was certainly amongst one of the very first countries that began to see Muslim identity and Muslim political assertiveness within what we might call an equalities framework, an equalities inclusion framework. It didn't happen overnight—it required controversy, thought, research, and public intellectual engagement. I'd like to say I've been leading the way with others, and it's by no means a completed task. For example, there are still people who say, "How can there be racism against Muslims? They're a religious group," forgetting that one of our paradigm groups as targets of racism are the Jews—a religious group. Nobody has a problem talking about anti-Semitism as a historic and contemporary form of racism, and yet a lot of people are either confused or for their own political, ideological reasons deny that Islamophobia can be a form of racism.

So the Bristol School of Multiculturalism is this kind of amalgam of ideas, political challenges in British society, sociological research, but directed by taking a certain kind of communitarian position within Anglophone political theory debates about multiculturalism and emphasising that secularism should be religion friendly and not, as some people think, religion exclusive. Of course it has to be exclusive in certain kinds of ways. We want the government to be the government, not a set of bishops preaching at us or telling us what to do, but nevertheless we have to rethink some out-of-date ideas of secularism or just some poorly thought-out visions of secularism which actually don't fit the world we live in. Like a lot of people say: "Why should we be talking so much about religion? Britain's a secular society." Well, yes and no. We have bishops in the House of Lords; the Anglican Church is the church of state with the monarch as both the head of state and the head of the Anglican Church.

So I think the distinctive character of the Bristol School of Multiculturalism is that, as you can see, it very much ties up with the earlier themes of our conversation because it combines political theory and sociology, it is expressly normative—not at all shy about being normative—and it publicly engages with current controversies, especially those to do with racism, equality, and Muslims.

