Sara Salem May 27th, 2025

The point is to change it

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, Sara Salem answers.

I want to focus on a part of the prompt that asked us to consider whether sociology should remain distinct and disengaged from ethical and moral considerations. I want to touch on this through my own research on anticolonial struggles, past and present, in two ways—the revolutionary power of anticolonial knowledge production, and the idea of haunting and how we might make space for loss and absence.

I begin with a quote from someone often mentioned as an early figure in sociology, Karl Marx, who famously said that the task is not just to know the world, but to change it. There has long existed the tradition of the public or committed intellectual. In this view, knowledge is not just important, but powerful; to truly understand the world is to be able to resist the way it is structured. Marx's writing, for instance, was part of a moment in history during which a global socialist imaginary was nurtured and created. The mid-twentieth century, the era of liberation struggles and decolonisation, was equally an era of Third World Marxism and its many iterations. His careful analysis of capitalism, alongside the knowledge produced by anticolonial movements and thinkers, unveiled a system that otherwise often appears as natural or, worse, inescapable.

This intellectual labour changed the world, even if the neoliberal counter-revolution of the 1970s decimated the left and its hopes for a future beyond capitalist exploitation. In these movements and indeed in Marx himself we see a strong critique of the idea that academic disciplines—economics, for him, sociology, for us—are purely objective, capturing truths about the world through measurements and scientific studies. Indeed, this is part of the power of capitalism—that its core

tenets are repeated as hard facts, scientific accuracies, beyond criticism because those who write them are merely studying the world as it is, not involved in anything as disturbing as politics. To reveal the assumptions underpinning economics, for Marx, was a liberatory form of labour.

Many anticolonial thinkers and movements have also noted the way academic knowledge production is most deeply political precisely when it claims not to be. We might think about how decades of scholarship, including by sociologists, on the Middle East—"objective, focused on facts, rigorous"—has been used to justify the ongoing Israeli genocide against Palestinians, the illegal invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and countless other examples. The Middle East, here, is a space of "endless war and conflict," a space in which Arab men are particularly prone to violence, and where we find a peculiar lack of democracy, of gender equality, of freedom; this work, often presented as apolitical, serves violence directly, justifying it, legitimising it, or rendering it unimportant or invisible. As Edward Said told us a long time ago, there is an Orient that is created through the repetition of certain ideas. These ideas are supposedly disengaged from ethical, moral and political considerations, simply existing as facts; the political here, unlike in anticolonial or Marxist work, is excised, and erased.

Turning to my second point, and the idea of absence, Avery Gordon similarly addresses the question of how the violence of capitalism, colonialism and racism remain "unseen" and "unknown." For Gordon, who wrote *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination,* abstractions like "racism" and "capitalism" may name forms of power, but they do not fully convey how these forms create the possible and impossible themselves. While abstraction is important, it can also erase the densities and complexities of everyday life; the subjective experiences of longings, desires, and pain that always animate it. Gordon approaches this through the idea of haunting, or "ghostly matters"—the intimations, hints, suggestions, omens, and traces, sensations that are all around us. She calls for a new sociology that can attend to such queer effects and can negotiate the relationship between what we only see and what we actually know. This way of knowing is more a listening than a seeing, a practice of being attuned to the echoes of what has been lost, disappeared, or destroyed. She writes: "I used the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view."

If the past haunts the present, *how* can we capture, write about, or teach about something that *haunts?* In my work on anticolonial struggle, past and present, I think about how the promises, betrayals, hopes and mistakes of past liberation movements haunt us in the present, through traces we encounter in our everyday lives: a street named after Patrice Lumumba in Cairo, Egypt, signalling a lost history of solidarity between Egypt and Congo; embodied memories of the Palestinian nakba in oral histories that remind us of a horrific event that took place, a people that existed and continue to exist, and a land that belonged to them, a past that is being repeated today; or we might think of traces in colonial archives of solidarity between sailors and enslaved people from long ago, a reminder that there have always been those who resisted. Memories, faded material traces, hidden

archives, embodied knowledge—all of this becomes a way of identifying haunting and following its trajectory.

To do this work is overtly political. Leaving behind the old debate of whether an objective or neutral knowledge is possible, it asks instead what kind of knowledge we need to face a world that is falling apart. It is to ask who, or what kind of future, we are accountable to. Part of this work is not to produce something new but to recover knowledge that came out of past struggle; different hopes, desires and dreams show us that there have always been collective struggles around what liberation means. These knowledges are often not found in canonical academic writing or official archives. Nor are they available through methodologies that emerged from colonial ways of studying "the other." But they do exist. Telling us, to quote Gordon, "Look. Here. They're wrong. We do know how to live better. We have pretty good answers to different questions. We've been at it a long time."

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