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## What kind of normativity does sociology need? Rethinking values, knowledge and critique

At the roundtable discussion of our departmental conference “**Sociological Routes: Past, Present and Future**”, held on 15 November 2024, we posed a provocative question: Should sociology remain descriptive, or is engaging with normative questions essential to understand social life? As one might expect, the goal was not to settle the issue definitively, but to spark a conversation that would invite our participants to a shared reflection on one of sociology’s most enduring and urgent debates. This question aimed to explicitly interrogate the boundary between description and evaluation, a boundary that recent theoretical developments have framed as the “**normative turn**” in sociological theory.

Normative issues have been deeply embedded in sociology since its inception. Foundational thinkers such as Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and Du Bois, were all concerned with different ways of evaluating the social world. Weber, for instance, explored various forms of legitimacy. In this sense, what is often referred to as “classical social theory” was already engaged with how moral ideas are shaped and expressed in society. However, this normative dimension was frequently left implicit, as few of these thinkers provided systematic accounts of normativity itself. As the discipline became increasingly professionalised and aligned with scientific standards—particularly from Western academic contexts—a tendency emerged to disregard the moral assumptions embedded in sociological inquiries. In more recent years, scholars from a variety of backgrounds have questioned this trajectory, advocating for a more reflexive and explicit engagement with the normative foundations of sociological knowledge—among others, see the work of **Jeffrey C. Alexander, Andrew Abbott, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, Andrew Sayer, and Margaret Archer.**

Rather than reinforcing a binary, the roundtable highlighted the nuanced terrain in which sociology, as a knowledge project, is inevitably entangled with values—whether through our methodological choices, conceptual frameworks, or commitments to critique and social transformation. The contributions from three of our faculty members—each rooted in a distinct intellectual tradition—

reflect this complexity, offering a valuable opportunity to reconsider the role of normativity in contemporary sociological research.

**Monika Krause's contribution** offers a provocative starting point: the idea that non-normative sociology is a myth. Building on Weber and Becker, she argues that all sociological inquiry is shaped by value-laden perspectives, whether we admit it or not. But rather than abandoning objectivity or sliding into moralising, Krause calls for a reflexive method—one that brackets our own normative assumptions to better understand the diverse moral worlds of others. Her approach, inspired by science and technology studies, invites us to treat all beliefs symmetrically, not to neutralise critique but to ground it more rigorously. In doing so, she reframes normativity not as a bias to overcome, but as a methodological choice rooted in openness and contingency.

**Sara Farris' contribution** brought a philosophical edge to the discussion by challenging simplistic oppositions between the descriptive and the normative. Instead, she offers a different generative framing: the difference between sociology that explains the world as it is and sociology that builds normative claims from theories of human nature and action. Through a sharp comparison of two feminist traditions—ethics of care and social reproduction feminism—Farris showed how normative visions gain power when grounded in materialist social theory. Her central provocation is that normativity without robust social analysis risks drifting into abstraction. For Farris, the task is clear: if sociologists want to make claims about how the world ought to be, they must first reckon seriously with how it actually works.

**Sara Salem's contribution** brought a powerful political urgency to the conversation, arguing that sociology has never been neutral—and shouldn't pretend to be. Drawing on Marxist and anticolonial traditions, she reframed normative sociology as a practice of resistance: one that exposes how claims to objectivity often uphold systems of power, and instead insists on recovering the suppressed histories and radical possibilities buried in the present. For Salem, the task isn't just critique—it's listening to the ghosts of struggle that still shape our world and daring to imagine something different. In this view, normativity isn't about abstract values—it's about accountability, and the futures we choose to fight for.

Taken together, these three contributions don't resolve the question of whether sociology should be normative, but they help reframing this growing concern—a shift that is increasingly visible across the field. The *BSA* journal *Sociology*, for instance, has recently taken up this mantle with its call for papers for a **special issue** on "The Normative Turn in Sociology: Opening the Black Box", urging scholars to explore how normativity operates within the discipline. The contributions to our roundtable should be read as very much part of this evolving conversation.

What kind of normativity does sociology need today? One that is reflexive without being paralysed. One that engages with values without collapsing into moralism. One that remembers its entanglement with history, conflict, and implication. As the following texts demonstrate, this is not just a theoretical challenge—it is an invitation to imagine what sociology can be.

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### About the author



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