

Occasional paper New Series



**Moral Sociology.
The Alternative to Value Freedom**

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State University of Rio de Janeiro
Brazil

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About the Occasional Papers (New Series)

The new series of occasional Papers of the department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad, is intended to encourage dialogue and debate around important contemporary issues, especially in India and the south, with focus on interdisciplinary and comparative perspectives. Some of the papers are based in presentation made by visiting scholars at the department, including those under the department's UGC Special assistance programme (SAP). Response to these papers are welcome and may be sent to the head of the department at the e-mail: headsss@uohyd.ernet.in, departmentofsociology@uohyd.ac.in

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Moral Sociology: The Alternative to Value Freedom

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About the Author

Prof Frederic Vandenberghe, is a research professor in Sociology at the Institute of Social and Political Studies, State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil since 2007. In his own words, Prof Vandenberghe has lived 'in a suitcase' for almost 20 years, visiting different universities in the western hemisphere (e.g. University of Manchester, Yale University, UCLA, to name a few), before calling Brazil, home. During these long sojourn(s), he dealt with mainly one foundational question: how philosophy can be understood by posing sociological questions, and how sociology can be understood by raising philosophical questions. Beginning this intellectual journey Prof. Vandenberghe first looked into the intricacies of the notion of "reification", through the lens of metacritique, for his doctoral dissertation "*A Philosophical History of German Sociology. Alienation and Reification*" was published in French in 2 volumes, (translated in English by Routledge in 2009). Prof. Vandenberghe has published a book on the sociology of George Simmel (in French), a book on posthumanism and biocapitalism (in French) and, more recently, he has also gathered some of his main articles on critical realism, internal conversations, collective subjectivities, Bourdieu and biotechnology in *What's Critical about Critical Realism? Essays in Reconstructive Social Theory* (Routledge, 2014). Taking forward Roy Bhaskar's notion of 'transcendental realism' and the 'philosophy of meta-reality', Prof Vandenberghe suggests that it is time for giving more importance to heart over stomach and an open hand over fist, while theorizing the social philosophy. He is currently writing a book (in French) on the new trends in world sociology and gathering materials for a book (in Portuguese) on the sociology of the soul.

More information can be found on his personal webpage: <http://frederic.iesp.uerj.br>

Moral Sociology: The Alternative to Value Freedomⁱ

"A moral philosophy characteristically presupposes a sociology"

Alasdair MacIntyre: *After Virtue*, p. 23.

"Social scientists are moral philosophers in disguise"

Alan Wolfe: *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation*, p. 23

While a good deal of contemporary sociology is political and moralizing, moral sociology as such remains largely underdeveloped. Recently, there has been a resurgent interest in moral sociology with concerted attempts to institutionalize it as a specialized subfield of inquiry, both in mainland Europe (centered around the work of Honneth, Boltanski and Thévenot) and in the Anglo-Saxon world (influenced by the work of communitarians like MacIntyre, Taylor and Walzer or by the critical realism of Bhaskar and Archer).ⁱⁱ Unlike the sociology of religion, the sociology of knowledge or the sociology of arts, moral sociology does not have a real tradition. The founding fathers had, of course, a strong interest in morality and ethicsⁱⁱⁱ. To the extent that there's a canon, Émile Durkheim would be its prime figure (even though he didn't finish his book *La morale*). Max Weber and his paradoxical defense of axiological neutrality would come second, even if it undermines ethics. Marx doesn't have any specific texts on ethics as such and it is not even clear if there's space in Marxism for a morality that is not subservient to politics. After all, as Marx (1969: 229) declared, "communists do not preach any morality at all". With his *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft*, Georg Simmel (1991) has two volumes on ethics, but they are not very sociological and deconstruct most of its basic concepts. Following the Second World War, more than any one else, Talcott Parsons has continued the Durkheimian tradition and underscored the moral dimension of social life. With the downfall of structural functionalism in the 1960's, moral sociology went into hibernation as well.^{iv} Pierre Bourdieu certainly has a sociology of morality, but no moral sociology. Like everything else, he explains morality sociologically, but does not leave much space for independent moral reflection. As a counter position, there's Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action and discourse ethics, but most sociologists would consider him a philosopher anyway.

