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Collaborative Circles and Their Discontents

Revisiting Conflict and Creativity in Frankfurt School Critical Theory

by Neil McLaughlin

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Historians and biographers are notoriously a-theoretical, preferring narratives and archival details to theoretical generalizations about social life and individuals. And sociologists of knowledge and intellectuals sometimes write about intellectual life as if individual biography and the personal lives of scholars and writers were irrelevant to the social processes that produce ideas. Might there be ways we could combine biography, intellectual history and social science theory? There are, I think, many ways to do so, and numerous good reasons why this type of synthetic work is important and useful.¹ This paper² will be one such effort, consisting of an attempt to combine historical and biographical work on the Frankfurt School of critical theorists with a sociological approach to intellectual creativity outlined in Michael Farrell's provocative book *Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics and Creative Work* [Farrell 2001].

¹ Lewis Coser's *Men of Ideas* [Coser 1963] provides an inspiration for a way of combining biography and general sociological perspectives in the study of intellectuals. More recently, the sociology of ideas are represented by the work of Charles Camic and Neil Gross [Gross 2008] provides exemplars for the kind of approach I am arguing for here.

² An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2004 annual meeting of the Eastern Sociological Association, a panel that gave me the opportunity to dialogue directly with Michael Farrell on his fascinating theoretical perspective. In the section of this essay where I discuss the Fromm and Adorno conflict, I have borrowed some formulations and sentences from my *Canadian Journal of Sociology* piece from 1999, an essay which is available on-line at <http://www.cjsonline.ca/articles/mclaughlin.html>.

This attempt to think about the Frankfurt School circle using social science approaches builds on my earlier research on German psychoanalyst, sociologist and social critic Erich Fromm [McLaughlin 1996; McLaughlin 1998a; McLaughlin 1998b; McLaughlin 1999]. The case of Erich Fromm provided an empirical entry point into a variety of distinct but related intellectual/sociological issues, raising broader questions worth further examination. Fromm, who was born in 1900 and died in 1980, was a major global public intellectual figure throughout the world during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s after publishing the best-selling book *Escape from Freedom* in 1941. From the late 1960s, however, Fromm's intellectual reputation declined despite his widespread fame and the sales of his books in the multi-millions, providing a text-book case of "how to become a forgotten intellectual" [McLaughlin 1998a].

Fromm went from being a major intellectual figure to a neglected thinker who millions have heard of, but few serious intellectuals read, particularly in the United States and Canada where both his rise to fame and his dramatic decline was most pronounced. Fromm lost status *despite* the fact that many of his ideas, particularly within psychoanalysis, turned out to have had enormous staying power. Contemporary psychoanalysis is dominated by various object-relations, self-psychology and interpersonal theories, ideas similar to the revision of psychoanalysis that Fromm helped pioneer in the 1930s and 1940s [Burston 1991; Mitchell 1988]. The case of how psychoanalysts took the message while killing the messenger helps illuminate the perils as well as the intellectual advantages of relative institutional marginality for intellectual creativity [McLaughlin 2001a]. Ideas similar to many of Fromm's writings also have maintained influence in contemporary sociology, social criticism and critical theory circles, despite his relative obscurity today among young scholars and intellectuals [McLaughlin 1998a; McLaughlin 2001b]. Contemporary sociologists, furthermore, talk extensively about the possibilities and potential for a public sociology, often citing David Riesman and Robert Bellah as role models, while generally ignoring Fromm despite the direct influence he had on the development of *The Lonely Crowd* [Riesman 1950] and various 1950s and 1960s era versions of sociological social criticism [McLaughlin 2001b; Fromm 1941; Fromm 1947; Fromm 1956; Fromm 1959; Fromm 1961; Fromm 1970; Fromm 1973; Fromm 1976].

The explanation for why Fromm's intellectual reputation rose and fell so dramatically has to do with what I call his "escape from orthodoxy." Fromm was an unorthodox Marxist and Freudian, an interdisciplinary public intellectual and an out-spoken critic of modern society who wrote popular mass-market books as well as dense theoretical texts, a sociologically unviable position. Writing before it became fashionable to talk about public intellectuals [Townsend 2005], Fromm was,

ultimately too scholarly and intellectual to maintain his fame among mass market audiences. At the same time, however, he never really belonged to one academic school of thought, a clearly defined intellectual tradition or, indeed, one discipline or genre of writing.

An important element of the “rise and fall of Erich Fromm” also concerned his complex relationship to the Frankfurt School, a story that has inspired this reexamination of the intellectual history of the critical theorists. My earlier essay “Origin Myths in the Social Science: Fromm, the Frankfurt School and the Emergence of Critical Theory,” [McLaughlin 1999] criticized contemporary Frankfurt School scholarship because of its tendency to ignore the fact that Fromm was a central member of the network of critical theorists. Much contemporary scholarship within critical theory (as well as the most influential histories of the Frankfurt School) is infused by origin myths regarding the emergence of critical theory in Germany in the 1930s [for example, Jay 1973, but see Bronner 1994; Burston 1991; Wheatland 2004a; Wheatland 2004b; Wiggershaus 1994]. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, Fromm was clearly an important early member of Max Horkheimer’s circle, a group that also included such influential as well as forgotten scholars as Leo Lowenthal, Henryk Grossmann, Franz Neumann, Herbert Marcuse, Friedrich Pollock, Karl Wittfogel and Theodor Adorno.

Even Walter Benjamin, who was clearly not central to the Frankfurt School network during his all too short lifetime was retrospectively given a more prominent role in history of critical theory, eclipsing Fromm despite the fact that he was relatively marginal compared to Fromm in the intellectual and institutional life of the Institute. Benjamin had been a radical essayist who became close to Adorno, in particular, and who wrote for the Institute journal and relied on the network for financial support. He later famously committed suicide on the French-Spanish border as a result of being stopped as he attempted to flee Nazi occupied Europe. Benjamin’s place in the Frankfurt School tradition today is a good example of how schools of thought are retrospectively reconstructed in light of contemporary intellectual needs not historical accuracy – an origin myth evolved as scholars re-wrote their history in order to justify contemporary practices. There is much of value in Benjamin’s work, but his influence has been exaggerated, as when scholars suggest that he was one of the intellectual beacons of student protest in the 1960s along with Adorno, Marcuse, Sartre and Block [Fuecks 2008]. Benjamin’s example perhaps illustrates the reputational advantages of an early and tragic death as in the case of George Orwell [Rodden 1989], C. Wright Mills and Che Guevara. Looking carefully at how the Frankfurt School was socially constructed by scholars in the social sciences and humanities throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s represents, I argued, a case study that would

allow us to think theoretically about how intellectual life is created and sustained partly by the creation of origin myths and intellectual heroes.

More generally, the Frankfurt School makes for a fascinating case study in the sociology of knowledge. The critical theorists have clearly been an important part of Twentieth century intellectual history, giving us such influential ideas as the “authoritarian personality” in political psychology, the analysis of the “cultural industries” so influential in contemporary cultural studies and media studies, and key elements of the New Left ideology of the 1960s, particularly through the reception of Marcuse [Bronner 1994]. The work of Habermas, furthermore, is arguably the most important theoretical framework produced in the orbit of sociology in the later years of the Twentieth century. Few could deny the importance of the Frankfurt School, despite the numerous criticisms of the tradition we have seen over the past fifty years in psychology, sociology, cultural studies and social criticism. While Fromm was a central member of the early circle of the Frankfurt School, the history of the circle has not been told this way. One of the most creative thinkers within one of the most important contemporary schools of thought has effectively been marginalized in the academy and among intellectuals despite the fact that similar ideas to the ones he articulated and developed seem to retain vibrancy and widespread interest. Why?

The answer that I offered a decade ago had to do with two major factors. First, I emphasized the material base of the critical theorists, noting the irony that Marxists have been reticent in highlighting the ways that Marxist intellectuals themselves make their living as they develop a materialist analysis of capitalist society. The Frankfurt School, after all, were essentially a Marxist think-tank like network who were able to develop their ideas outside the direct control of the German academic world and the left-wing political parties of the day because they controlled a nest-egg of funding that came from the inheritance of a German capitalist who had made a fortune in Argentina, and then left his money to his radical son who funded left-wing intellectual projects. Horkheimer came to control this funding, and battles over tenured status in the Institute (where Adorno replaced Fromm in the core of the faculty in the late 1930s) provided a material base for an internal conflict within critical theory that was framed at the time and in the subsequent literature in exclusively intellectual and/or personal terms. In reality, Fromm left the network in the context of a large financial loss the institute had taken in its investments – he was asked to forgo his salary partly because his therapeutic practice made him far more financially secure than the other core members. There were, of course, personal, political and intellectual differences that were part of Fromm’s break with the Institute as we will discuss later, but clearly money was a major element of the story.

Perhaps more fundamentally, I emphasized how Fromm's intellectual challenge to both Marxist and Freudian orthodoxies, and his relative independence from the influence of Horkheimer (the independence was due partly to the fact that Fromm made money from his therapeutic practice, but also flowed from his personality and what Neil Gross [2008] calls intellectual identity, was a challenge to the vision that Horkheimer held for the emerging Frankfurt School. For better or for worse, both Marxism and psychoanalysis were pivotal schools of thought and intellectual traditions in the West in the immediate post-war period. Fromm rose to fame by defending a humanist version of Marx and Marxism from attacks from a variety of different positions: rabidly anti-communist Cold War intellectuals, narrow academic professionals and Stalinist hacks. At the same time, however, Fromm was never really an orthodox Marxist, preferring an eclectic blend of Freud, Marx, philosophical anthropology and sociology to any narrow political orthodoxy. Fromm also believed that Freud was a genius who created a brilliantly original and profound intellectual system, but Fromm's intellectual identity lead him to reject the dogmatism of much of the organized psychoanalytic community. The Frankfurt School thinkers made their peace with versions of both orthodox Marxism and psychoanalysis; while Fromm's reputation was damaged by his various intellectual battles with defenders of the faith within intellectual systems he drew upon, modified, popularized and critically defended.

My argument in the "origin myths" piece was purposefully provocative, as a corrective to what I saw as a distorted history of Fromm's involvement in the circle promoted by partisan Frankfurt School scholars. The basic contours of the story hold: Fromm remains an under-studied and under-appreciated proponent of the critical theory perspective and the rhetoric in the scholarship on members of the critical theory tradition (this is especially true with Adorno) continues to draw on themes that verge on intellectual hero worship. We also do not yet have a full history of the Frankfurt School that moves far enough away from the original Martin Jay narrative [but see Wiggershaus 1994; Bronner 1994; Wheatland 2004a; Wheatland 2004b]. Recent scholarship, far from undermining my argument, reinforces it, as is the case with Thomas Wheatland's excellent historical reconstruction of the story of how the Frankfurt School came to find a safe haven from Nazi controlled Germany at Columbia University in the 1930s. Not only did Erich Fromm direct (along with Julian Gumperz) the Institute's campaign for affiliation with Columbia [Wheatland 2004b, 11], Fromm's empirical research agenda was a central reason sociologist Robert Lynd was willing to intervene with the Columbia administration to help gain the critical theorists access to housing on Morningside Heights. As Wheatland summarizes the situation with regards to Fromm's reputation in the 1930s, "in the eyes

of Columbia's faculty, he was the central figure guiding the Horkheimer circle's most significant work" [Wheatland 2004a, 65].

Retrospectively, it is clear that I overstated elements of my case, partly for dramatic affect given the unbalanced nature of the existing scholarship at the time. Recent scholarship shows how much time Fromm spent away from the network around Horkheimer, partly because of his therapeutic practice but more importantly because of long-term and recurring illness [conversation with Lawrence Friedmann, spring 2008]. One should emphasize how generous Horkheimer was with Fromm, for example, with regards to providing money and help with securing passage for Fromm's mother from Germany to the United States in the period when it became difficult for Jews to leave. Fromm's preoccupation with personal matters and his own career ambitions and Horkheimer's legitimate concerns about getting on with the Institute's collective work were clearly part of the story of the break, something I could have emphasized more. And there are grounds for reasonable disagreements regarding the intellectual issues at stake in the break between Fromm and the Frankfurt School, in particular with regards to the question of Freudian theory and the methodological and political differences around the working class in Weimar empirical study at the center of the early work of the critical theorists.³

I have been drawn to the theory of collaborative circles partly to help beyond my own partisan account of the Frankfurt School; the conflicts that occurred within the network of critical theorists should be seen as part of a larger pattern that occurs in innovative circles more generally. It remains true that Fromm's flaws and limitations were exaggerated and blown out of proportion both by his right-wing political critics (sociologists Robert Nisbet and Edward Shils, for example, and philosopher Allan Bloom) and left-wing polemics articulated by various orthodox Marxists and Stalinists as well as by Marcuse, Adorno and a whole generation of New Left social thinkers. There was a need for a different perspective, and my origin myths piece provided

³ I do not generally disagree with Neil Gross's stress on the need to try to be agnostic regarding the content and quality of ideas when doing the sociology of ideas [Gross 2008]. At the same time, I have argued, and continue to believe, that much of the content of Fromm's ideas is more useful theoretically and empirically than is often seen to be the case among sociologists and among Frankfurt School partisans. Clearly there is a tension between arguing *for* the value of certain ideas, and efforts to do a sociological analysis of ideas and thinkers. I can only say that my partisanship in favor of Fromm is hardly more one-sided than the mainstream Frankfurt School orthodoxy with regards to Adorno, Marcuse and other venerated intellectual heroes in the tradition. Moreover, while I have tried to bracket the content of ideas in this essay, ultimately I am skeptical of the practicality of a sociology of ideas where scholars are agnostic about the *content* of ideas. The best work in the sociology of ideas is likely coming to be done by scholars willing to seriously engage over many years the content of ideas, and this necessity is in serious tension with the more objective scientific sampling model argued (sensibly) for in Gross (2008).

that in sharp terms. Emphasizing Fromm's side of the story as I did, however, does not really allow us to understand how the intramural battles between various Frankfurt School thinkers represents one small example of very common patterns among intellectuals as they attempt to forge new ideas and battle over resources, intellectual recognition and respect. In the spirit of rethinking old debates and polemics, I would like to rethink the history of the critical theorists by de-centering Fromm in the story, and using Farrell's model for thinking about what he calls "collaborative circles." This essay is offered as a theoretical contribution in order to complicate my earlier polemics and suggest potentially fruitful new approaches for research in the sociology of ideas in light of advances in the field since the 1990s.

While Fromm's reputation was indeed damaged by crusading opponents of his ideas within Marxism and psychoanalysis respectively, the concept of collaborative circles helps us move beyond a hero versus villain mode of telling intellectual history or writing biography and the sociology of ideas. In the spirit of work in the sociology of ideas that attempts to remain relatively agnostic about the actual value or correctness of ideas [Frickel and Gross 2003; Gross 2008], we will focus here on attempting to do a sociological analysis of the formation and dissolution of networks of intellectuals using the critical theorists as a case study. To accomplish these goals, I will: 1) discuss the theory of collaborative circles as outlined in Farrell; 2) apply the concept of collaborative circles to the critical theorists, attempting to explore how this theory might illuminate their creativity and explain some of their conflicts; 3) discuss the limitations of Farrell's approach as part of an effort to outline an agenda for applying and theoretically developing the theory of collaborative circles using a broader theoretical frame and a more diverse range of case studies. I will conclude with some thoughts on just such alternative theoretical perspectives within the sociology of ideas that might be productively applied to the Frankfurt School, particularly the notion of scientific intellectual movements [Frickel and Gross 2005]. The use of the concept of scientific intellectual movements alongside the notion of a collaborative circle suggests the need to integrate hybrid models for thinking about intellectual movements, collaborative circles and schools of thought within scholarly networks, a point that I try to illustrate here with the Frankfurt School example.

What are Collaborative Circles?

The concept of collaborative circles was developed by the sociologist Michael Farrell [2001] in a book consisting of cases studies of the French Impressionists, the American Fugitive Poets, and the early Freudians, the Ultras Elizabeth Cady Stanton

and Susan B. Anthony. Farrell's work is in that creative space between history, biography and social science, for he has been working on numerous historically grounded case studies of creative artists and painters (he has been working on the Canadian artists the Group of Seven as well as on William Morris, case studies that did not appear in the book) while developing a theory of how intellectual innovation and creativity is often grounded in small group dynamics, friendship networks and deviant behavior. Putting aside the complexities of Farrell's intensively historical method and case study approach for now, let us look at the essentials of his general theory of collaborative circles.

Collaborative circles are essentially circles of intellectuals, scholars, artists, activists or various cultural/political/scientific innovators who create a new vision for work in the particular field they operate in. They usually consist of 3-7 individuals in the inner core of the circle. The members of the circle are usually young people in their 20s when the circle forms and tend to be relative equals in terms of status and various sociological characteristics who share common cultural and/or intellectual/political/scientific interests. Collaborative circles tend to form in what Farrell calls "magnet places" – sites like New York, Paris, London, Toronto or New Orleans where creative innovators and ambitious young people gather. For a variety of reasons, the members of the circle have come to be cut off from powerful mentors in their particular field, and the collaborative circles form to sustain creative work in the relative absence of mentor/protégée relationships. Counter to a range of perspectives that stress mentors as being central to intellectual creativity as cultural capital is passed on from generation to generation [Collins 1998], Farrell stresses the creative aspects and dynamics of intellectual rebellion away from powerful mentors.⁴

Farrell argues for three major theoretical entry points in developing his account of collaborative circles and the role they play in sustaining intellectual innovation. First, drawing from research on small groups, he argues that there is a life-course history to collaborative circles that can roughly be understood to play out in seven stages: formation, rebellion, quest, creative work, collective action, individualization, and reunion. The active life history of a circle tends to be between 10-15 years, and proceeds in a series of stages outlined below. In addition, drawing from small group research as well as scholarship on delinquent gangs, Farrell argues that there are particular roles played within the group at different stages of the group process (for example, gatekeeper, executive manager, peacekeeper, etc.). Thirdly, Farrell draws

⁴ Obviously Collins is concerned with how intellectuals break from their teachers in order to establish their own innovations and carve out individual attention and reputation, but the focus of his model remains on the teacher-student connections not the kind of micro-level theory of breaks in mentorship at the center of Farrell's approach.

on Kohut's self-psychology (an influential revision of psychoanalysis that moves away from orthodox Freudian theory, substituting a focus on the self an earlier concerns with libido) to emphasis the psychological dynamics that operate in collaborative circles, as creative thinkers merge their identities during the quest/creative work stages as they search for the confidence, emotional support and exchange of ideas required to break from intellectual orthodoxies and create a new intellectual/cultural vision for work in their respective discipline or form of cultural production.⁵ Given space constraints, I will focus on presenting and then using Farrell's stage and role theories.

The Stages of Collaborative Circles

In the formation stage, there is the role of the "gatekeeper" who brings "novices" into the circle that often gathers in public settings. Circles, in this stage, are usually undifferentiated and highly informal. They gather in magnet places where there is intellectual excitement brewing, and the novices are linked to but often not highly integrated with powerful mentors in the field in question. In the rebellion stage, a charismatic leader helps the circle gain the courage to rebel against the intellectual/culturally orthodoxy of the time, be it the French art establishment, the American literary elite, or the European medical community, depending on the nature of the circle. In this stage, one often finds a "tyrant" from outside the group that represents in an exaggerated even projected form what the emerging group is rebelling against (for example, established painting style, or the literary canon, or established orthodoxy in an academic discipline). Inside the group a "lightening rod" gathers together the emerging intellectual energy in the group, and is attacked from outside the group as representing the intellectual heresy or threat of the group as a whole. The lightening rod also tends to attack the internal scapegoats within the group. At this stage of the circle, there sometimes also emerges a "peacemaker" who tries to mediate conflict within the group. The circle, at this stage of its development, tends to meet in ritualized places as a fairly cohesive group.

In the quest and creative work stages, the group starts to develop its new vision for its art, politics, literature, social science or other form of cultural creativity. The circle, at this stage of its development, has tended to break up into collaborative pairs. Drawing, at this stage of his theory, from the psychoanalytic perspective of Kohut, Farrell argues that new ideas are often created in pairs of cultural workers engaged

⁵ I will not have time here to discuss the psychological aspects of Farrell's theory, even though this part of his work holds potential for scholars interested in bringing social science theory, psychoanalysis and biography together.

in what he calls “instrumental intimacy.” Sharing works in progress, and radical unformed ideas, the collaborative pairs serve, for Farrell, an important psychological role in allowing the thinkers to have the courage and self-confidence to break from the intellectual orthodoxy in their field. In a transitional space, where both thinkers in the collaborative pair idealize each other and play out unresolved psychological transferences from the past, ideas are created that are not the property of any one person, but are indeed collectively created.

The vision of the group, in the creative stage of the circle, emerges as various collaborative pairs test out their ideas to the larger circle. In this stage of the circle, some members take on the role of the radical boundary marker (someone who has gone too far in critiquing the intellectual establishment, or taking the group’s emerging ideas to their logical conclusions) while someone else plays the role of the conservative boundary marker (someone who lacks the courage for intellectual rebellion, and shows signs of going back into the fold of the intellectual establishment, selling the group out, so to speak). A center coalition often emerges within the context of the personal interactions between the collaborative pairs and debate among the larger circle, articulating the emerging consensus of what the new vision of the group consists of for the collectivity.

In the collective action stage of the group, this vision of a new form of art, intellectual approach, theory or political vision is taken out to the world as a whole in the context of some kind of collective project. It could be the establishment of a journal, a convention, or an exhibit, depending on the form of creative work involved. The executive manager becomes central to this stage of the circle, taking responsibility for finding and managing resources, setting goals, dealing with setbacks, and monitoring group progress. Given the practical and collective nature of work at this stage of the circle, increasingly conflict emerges, and the role of the peacemaker again becomes important as it was in the rebellion stage.

In the disintegration stage, the group fragments back into the individuals who had temporarily submerged their identities into collaborative pairs and the collectivity of the circle as a whole. Family responsibilities, success in the world outside the circle and desire for “credit” for ideas that were created in a period in the circle when no one cared about “intellectual property rights” leads to explicit conflicts and spits, now with no peacemaker having the incentives to keep the group together. And the psychological dynamics forged in the collaborative pairs has faded, leaving less idealization and more open personal conflict. And a more realistic and far less rosy view of the history of the circle begins to be articulated by members as they leave the circle. The life cycle of circles sometimes ends with a reunion stage (depending on how con-

flicted and bitter the split was!), as aging members of the circle return to each other for a ritualized reenactment of their earlier emotional connections and creative work.

Farrell developed this stage model in the course of numerous case studies of successful circles, the most compelling one being an account of the rise of French Impressionist painters. There are potential problems, of course, with “stage theories” as well as numerous theoretical and methodological issues to be worked out to integrate Farrell’s ideas with the broader literature on creativity and the sociology of ideas. Nonetheless, *Collaborative Circles* provides an original and useful account of the sociological dynamics involved in circles of creative thinkers/cultural workers. Moreover, his model provides a nice way for scholars to examine the ways that biographical accounts interact with sociological dynamics. Leaving a discussion of the problems of his theoretical concepts to the conclusion of this essay, let me now present an application of his model to the circle of intellectuals around Max Horkheimer – the creators of “critical theory” around and a group we now call the Frankfurt School. There are significant ways the history of the critical theorists fits the stages and dynamics of a collaborative circle, and important ways it does not. But first applying Farrell’s model to this case material will, I believe, help us understand the history of the Frankfurt School in new ways as well as allowing us to build on Farrell’s insights while moving beyond some of the limitations of his notion of collaborative circles.

The Frankfurt School as a Collaborative Circle

Formation Stage (1922-1931)

The formation stage of the circle around Horkheimer we now know as the Frankfurt School can be found in Germany sometime during the period from 1924-1931. The first attempt to develop critical theory was in 1923 when Felix Weil, the son of a wealthy German grain merchant, funded a Marxist Study Week circle which included Georg Lukacs, Friedrich Pollock, and Karl August Wittfogel. This never emerged as a successful circle, partly because of the controversial communist politics of many of the members who then went their own ways [Wiggershaus 1984, 15].

In 1924, however, Weil funded an Institute at Frankfurt University headed by political economist Carl Grunberg based partly on the members of this first circle who continued their association with early critical theory [*ibidem*, 24]. Political economist Friedrich Pollock was Grunberg’s assistant in the middle of the 1920s and not long after Grunberg had to stop working because of a stroke in 1928, Pollock’s friend Horkheimer was appointed head of the critical theory Institute [*ibidem*, 29-34]. Horkheimer then took over the role of gatekeeper for the circle [*ibidem*, 36-41],

although Pollock remained an important gatekeeping and executive manager figure, particularly behind the scene. For our purposes, it is the network around Horkheimer that forms the core of what we are referring to as the Frankfurt School collaborative circle.

One of the key characteristics of a collaborative circle is it a network of young intellectual innovators who are not tied closely to senior intellectual figures who play central roles as mentors. Collaborative circles are not formed around the relatively secure teacher-student chains that are central to the success of most schools of thought and academic innovations [Collins 1998; Frickel and Gross 2005]. According to Farrell, collaborative circles instead resemble delinquent gangs where there might be a first-among-equals leader but there is not major figure clearly older and far more professionally advanced. It is important to stress, in this light, that Horkheimer had relatively low status at Frankfurt University (he was hired as a faculty member at the institution where he received his *Habilitation*, something unusual in the German system and perhaps similar to being hired in North America at the institution where one does a PhD), so he did not have the stature to be a “mentor” to the Frankfurt School thinkers. Horkheimer established the school and had a formal position of director (an aspect where the Frankfurt School is not a collaborative circle, in Farrell’s terms), but all the early Frankfurt School scholars were young people of appropriately the same age and professional status. The Frankfurt School was formed, in this aspect, in very similar ways as was the French Impressionists, the early Freudians and other collaborative circles outlined in Farrell’s analysis.

It is certainly the case that the Frankfurt School network generally consisted of intellectuals who were cut off from their mentors, for a variety of personal, intellectual and historical reasons. Horkheimer, for example, had been a favourite student of the German philosopher Hans Cornelius, and through Cornelius’s connections he briefly studied with Husserl and encountered his assistant Martin Heidegger. Ultimately, however, Horkheimer’s broadly Marxist inclinations took him away from a traditional academic career, and his appointment as the director of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt was a move towards an accelerated but unusual career trajectory facilitated by-passing traditional hierarchies and processes. Horkheimer had not been involved centrally in the Institute in its early years, unlike his friend Pollock, but his success in gaining the position was aided by Pollock’s willingness to stand aside for his friend and the fact that Horkheimer was not politically compromised by communist affiliations as were a number of members of the initial network. Marcuse, to take another example of a critical theorist without a mentor, had been a student of Heidegger, and the rise of the Nazi movement which Heidegger notoriously supported inevitably cut the Jewish Marxist Marcuse off from a tradi-

tional teacher-student relationship with one of the major German philosophers of the Twentieth century. Fromm, furthermore, had studied with Alfred Weber, the famous German sociologist and Max Weber's younger brother. Ultimately, however, Fromm's Freudian and Marxist inclinations set him adrift to find his own intellectual identify and career path without a traditional academic mentor. Similar stories could be told with Lowenthal, Adorno and the other major figures of the Frankfurt School network. Randall Collins [1998] is surely right that few intellectual make major contributions in scholarly fields without some connections to core networks of innovators and prominent figures in the field. At the same time, however, Farrell is right to suggest the value of looking for broken protégé-mentor links as an alternative path towards intellectual creativity and innovation.

The dynamics created by the University of Frankfurt in the Weimar Germany of the time also fits the model Farrell laid out in *Collaborative Circles*. Weimar Germany in the early 1930s was a place in the middle of intense cultural and political turmoil and debate, adding to the intellectual excitement and tension that was absorbed into the work of the critical theory network. Frankfurt in the 1930s was a magnet place where political and cultural conflict drew talented young people and created intellectual excitement. Fromm, in particular, was deeply involved in creating a Freudian movement in Frankfurt at the time, and it was, it should be stressed a psychoanalytic *movement* concerned with ideas, reform and social change and was not the bureaucratic profession that psychoanalysis would later become after the Second World War, particularly in the United States and Canada. Additionally, the early Frankfurt School thinkers emerged out of the orbit of the Marxist tradition, giving the network a movement not a purely academic culture and orientation. For these contextual and contingent reasons, Horkheimer became the first in a community of relative equals who were unhappy with the political and intellectual status quo, setting the stage for the rebellion stage of the formation of their circle during a period of cultural and political crisis.

Rebellion Stage (1931-1934)

The early critical theorists had much to rebel against. The academic establishment of the time in German was either passive in response to the conflicts of the Weimar period and the rise of Nazism, or supportive of right wing nationalism. The Communist Party was compromised by their connections to Soviet Communism. And the German Social Democratic Party did not, from the perspective of many young radicals, have an intellectual or political answer to the breakdown of democracy in

Germany that was happening all around. The origins of what we call critical theory came from a rebellion against academic German philosophy, traditional left-wing political visions of both the communist and social democratic variety and the “science” of the emerging social sciences in German universities. The early critical theorists wanted to develop a vision that linked critical politics, the best of German idealist philosophy and an empirical research agenda [see Jay 1973].

Both the German philosophical establishment and various versions of academic social science influential at the time represented outside tyrants that Horkheimer positioned the emerging group against. In the years from 1931-1934, Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Pollock, Leo Lowenthal, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse emerged into a rebellious group of critical theorists who wanted to combine the controversial ideas of Freud and Marx with German idealism to develop a radical break with Western philosophy in order to help resist Nazism and create a new intellectual foundation for radical change. Horkheimer was clearly the charismatic leader, at this stage, although there were times when Fromm could compete for this role. Because the Frankfurt School was a circle linked to an (weakly) institutionalized position at the university, Pollock played the role of executive manager even in the rebellion stage; something that Farrell suggests emerges in the collective action stage for a collaborative circle. Lowenthal also played the role of gatekeeper at times, bringing Fromm (a friend from his youth) as well as Marcuse into the circle, as well as the peacekeeper throughout large parts of the circle’s early history. As Wiggershaus points out, Lowenthal had a long love-hate relationship with Adorno (partly because they had once shared Siegfried Kracauer as a mentor) [Wiggershaus 1994, 64]. In addition to editing the Institute journal in the early years, Lowenthal often played the role of peacekeeper when conflicts emerged.

Quest (1934-1938)/Creative Work (1939-1945) Stages

I would place the quest stage of the circle in the period from 1934-38. Perhaps the life-course of this circle was extended because they both had money from Weil and they were forced to flee Germany and become exiles first in Switzerland and then in New York City. Cut off from normal career advancement by anti-Semitism and war, as well as by their earlier intellectual rebellion, the period of the early 1930s represented a search for a new vision for social science and social philosophy on the part of the Frankfurt School network. A central concern of the circle was to combine German philosophical traditions, Freud, Marx and empirical social science. They worked, in this period, on an empirical study of authority and the family and a study of

the social psychology of the working class in Weimar which tried to explain the psychological roots of Nazism using a combination of Freudian and Marxist theories and empirical sociological research methods [Burston 1991; Bonss 1984; Fromm 1984].

A key element of the quest stage was the negotiations that went into getting the Frankfurt School invited to Columbia University with access to the building they used on Morningside Heights through-out the mid 1930s and early 1940s. Thomas Wheatland has carefully reconstructed the story of how labour economist Julian Gumperz, Fromm, Horkheimer and Pollock carefully maneuvered themselves in order to get an offer for a loose affiliation and the use of a building from the conservative Columbia University President Nicholas Murray Butler in 1934. This process had as much to do with impression management as it did with the creative processes associated with collaborative circles; Horkheimer had wisely made sure that the name of the network avoided direct references to Marxism (the concept of critical theory was, of course, partly designed to soft peddle their political commitments in a potentially unfriendly American context). Moreover, both Gumperz and Fromm were central to the negotiations precisely because of the fact that the Columbia sociology department, in particular, was interested in the empirical social science and social psychological research projects Fromm had directed in Germany [Wheatland 2004a; Wheatland 2004b].

Once the network had established themselves more or less securely in New York city, the key concerns of the quest stage within the Frankfurt School shifted towards an intellectual identity issue revolving differences between Adorno, Fromm, Horkheimer and to a lesser extent Marcuse regarding the role of psychoanalytic ideas within the critical theory vision [McLaughlin 1999]. Fromm had been a central member of the circle earlier in its history, as we emphasized earlier, and was the member of the circle who Horkheimer most respected as an intellectual equal; in the early part of the 1930s, the central collaborative pair within the network was Horkheimer and Fromm. Adorno was being supported by his wealthy parents and was not yet part of the full time tenured staff of the institute as was Fromm. Horkheimer had initially wanted to tie Adorno to the Institute without committing too much financial resources [Wiggershaus 1994]. The Institute had substantial but finite resources and Horkheimer's priority was maintaining him and his wife's own material security as well maintaining his control over the content of the work the critical theorists produced as a group. Horkheimer saw Fromm as collaborator in the early 1930s but gradually Adorno replaced him as a core member of the Frankfurt School and Horkheimer's trusted ally. This competition and struggle played itself out most dramatically over the use of psychoanalysis within critical theory, as they engaged in a quest for a new intellectual vision.

When Fromm first developed his psychological thought, he subscribed to an orthodox Freudian libido theory that emphasized the centrality of instincts. By the middle of the 1930s, however, Fromm had broken from Freudian orthodoxy to stress the importance of culture and interpersonal relations [Burston 1991] and an existential analysis of human psychic isolation that gave rise to what he would later describe as a “fear of freedom” [McLaughlin 1996]. Adorno had been suspicious of the collaboration between Horkheimer and Fromm while the Institute was based in Frankfurt and Adorno was also clearly hostile to Marcuse (these conflict can plausibly could be read as competition for Horkheimer’s attention and the Institute’s resources). The beginning of open conflict involving Adorno, however, can be dated to Fromm’s essay “The Social Determinate of Psychoanalytic Therapy,” an early version of his later criticisms of orthodox Freudian theory and therapy published in the critical theory’s journal in 1935 [Wiggershaus 1994]. In March 1936 Adorno wrote to Horkheimer defending Freud against Fromm’s revisionism. For Adorno, Fromm’s article:

(...) is sentimental and wrong to begin with, being a mixture of social democracy and anarchism, and above all shows a severe lack of the concept of dialectics. He takes the easy way out with the concept of authority, without which, after all, neither Lenin’s avant-garde nor dictatorship can be conceived of. I would strongly advise him to read Lenin. And what do the anti-popes opposed to Freud say? No, precisely when Freud is criticized from the left, as he is by us, things like the silly argument about a “lack of kindness” cannot be permitted. This is exactly the trick used by bourgeois individualists against Marx. I must tell you that I see a real threat in this article to the line which the journal takes [Cited in Wiggershaus 1994, 266].

From Adorno’s perspective, Fromm’s revision of Freudian theory inevitably lead away from a truly radical critique of modern society — substituting soft-hearted therapy for rigorous analysis. By the late 1930s Horkheimer had accepted Adorno’s critique of Fromm’s psychoanalytic theory. Both Adorno and Horkheimer insisted that “biological materialism” was “the theoretical core of psychoanalysis which was to be maintained against the revisionists” [*ibidem*, 271]. This conflict was not simply a theoretical dispute, as it has been treated in the literature, but was fundamentally a quest stage battle over the intellectual identity of a circle.

This intellectual conflict happened at the same time as a major conflict over resources, something generally ignored in the secondary literature. In the spring of 1939 Fromm was essentially dismissed from his tenured position at the Institute by Friedrich Pollack because of financial reasons. Pollock was largely responsible for investing the Institute’s resources, and as Wheatland [2004a, 69] puts it, by 1937 “poor investments in the stock market, combined with several disastrous real estate deals,

caused the group's assets to shrink, thereby forcing the directors to draw from the endowment's capital." Belt tightening was required, and as a result Fromm was asked to go without his salary since he had an income from therapy, an arrangement he declined [Jay 1973; Boons 1984]. Horkheimer and Fromm engaged in discussions at the end of 1939, but as Wiggershaus puts it "the breach had already taken place, and only the arrangements for the separation remained to be dealt with" [Wiggershaus 1994, 271]. Fromm received \$ 20,000 for giving up his tenure (a lot of money at the time in depression era America) and he turned his energies to therapy and writing what would become *Escape from Freedom* [Fromm 1941].

Adorno then entered the core of the Institute, and Horkheimer and especially Adorno became bitter enemies of Fromm. Fromm's fame as the author of *Escape from Freedom* made the split permanent and even more bitter [McLaughlin, 1996] – as Farrell's theory would suggest, it is next to impossible to separate who had contributed what to the Institute's early work since their identities were partly merged in group processes at the time. As a result of these group dynamics, however, the break-up of the network inevitably led to resentments and recriminations, as Adorno and Horkheimer, in particular, viewed Fromm's fame as coming from watered-down versions of the Institute's ideas. In any case, Horkheimer and Adorno became the public face of the Institute for Social Research in America. Adorno continued to be harshly critical of Fromm's revision of Freud, and he gave a paper entitled "Social Science and Sociological Tendencies in Psychoanalysis" in Los Angeles in April of 1946 [Jay 1973]. In addition to the early critique of Fromm's dissent from libido theory, Adorno later argued that the neo-Freudian attempt to combine psychological and sociological levels of analysis was misguided [Adorno 1967; Adorno 1968]. For Adorno, the revisionists "give an oversimplified account of the interaction of the mutually alienated institutions id and ego," "posit a direct connection between the institutional sphere and social experience" and are guilty of "superficial historicism" [*ibidem*, 79, 89].

Adorno's critique of Fromm eventually became the conventional wisdom among the followers of the Frankfurt School perspective. When the social protest movements of the 1960s created a significant market for critical theory among radical students and intellectuals, this critique of Fromm was popularized by Herbert Marcuse and then accepted by a generation of New Left scholars [Marcuse 1955b; Marcuse 1956; Jacoby 1975; Jacoby 1983; Richert 1986]. Central to this story was an influential Fromm/Marcuse debate published in three issues of *Dissent* magazine from fall 1955 to spring 1956 (Marcuse's contribution was reprinted as an epilogue to the 1956 book *Eros and Civilization*) [Richert 1986].

These conflicts, I would now argue, can be seen as part of the boundary marking of a collaborative circle in the quest stage of their life-history. As Farrell has emphasized, a collaborative circle often defines itself in the quest stage of development by laying down boundaries between the core ideas of the creative innovation and adherents who either are not willing to go far enough in breaking with traditional orthodox ideas or who go too far outside what is considered acceptable ideas. Ironically, Fromm served a function as a critical theorist who was unacceptable to the core vision of the school because he was seen as *both* not radical enough *and* too radical. One can see both themes in Adorno's letter to Horkheimer quoted above: Fromm was criticized as not being Leninist or Marxist enough, something that in the quest stage of critical theory was an essential part of their intellectual identity. At the same time, Fromm was represented as going too far in his revisions of Freud, threatening the intellectual integrity of the network and perhaps (I am speculating here) the ability of the Frankfurt School network to represent themselves as both Marxists and Freudians. As a consequence, Fromm became the scapegoat for the group, and Adorno became the lightning rod for the articulation of the emerging vision of what we now call critical theory. Once Fromm left the group, they entered in the creative work stage of the circle with a vision for critical theory that had emerged partly by rejecting Fromm and his intellectual vision.

As we emphasized, Fromm served as a boundary marker for the group in *both* too radical and too conservative directions. In a certain sense, Fromm was articulating a critique of psychoanalysis that could be defined as going too far, criticizing aspects of each of these traditions that were considered core beliefs: the theory of libido and oedipal complex in the Freudian tradition. Fromm's clear writing and left humanist democratic socialist thinker, however, were defined as conservative intellectual commitments, something that allowed Adorno and then Horkheimer and Marcuse to maintain good relations with the Freudian establishment (valuable allies in the American context, and make no mistake about it, the Frankfurt School network felt vulnerable in America in the 1930s for a variety of reasons that were real and not simply created by their dialectical imaginations) while still defining critical theory as courageous radical thinkers. Critical theory, as a result of this boundary work, emerged as a highly philosophical discourse that drew on Freudian ideas, was imbued with a militantly pessimistic tone that rejected liberalism and reformism, and was communicated through a highly abstract and philosophical approach aimed at intellectual elites not the popular masses. Critical theory thus emerged with Fromm as its foil and internal scapegoat, as they carved out and defined their boundaries.

At the same time, however, there were serious costs to the Frankfurt School when they lost Fromm's involvement. As Wheatland puts it succinctly:

With Fromm's departure the Institute could be seen for what it really was – a collection of social philosophers. The only reason Columbia's social scientists had mistaken the Institute for Social Research for a group of empirical researchers was due to the work of Erich Fromm. Now that he was gone, the institute had little to offer the university [Wheatland 2004a, 71].

On the positive side, however, the institute now had a coherent identity and less internal division. Horkheimer and Adorno, in particular, emerged as a collaborative pair at the center of the emerging center coalition of the circle, developing together many of the ideas that would later make up the book we know in English as *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*, and the various works on anti-Semitism and the culture industries that would make the Frankfurt School one of the most influential group of radical intellectuals of the Twentieth century [Jay 1973]. Adorno and Benjamin also operated as a collaborative pair, one albeit separated by distance and ended prematurely by Benjamin's death in Nazi controlled Europe. There was an emotional and intellectual bond between Adorno and the slightly older freelance radical writer Benjamin, something that resembles the instrumental intimacy that Farrell suggests is central to creative work in collaborative circles. Lowenthal, Pollock and (to a lesser extent) Marcuse also operated within the center coalition of the circle, with numerous other thinkers (Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer, Karl Wittfogel, among others) assigned to the periphery. The political scientist Neumann (along with Kirshheimer) represents the clearest case of the conservative boundary marker for the group – Neumann (particularly after he published his classic analysis of Nazism entitled *Behemoth*) was a far more traditional academic social scientist than the other members of the network. One can clearly see the evidence of suspicion of Neumann for selling out the group vision even in the quest stage, something that came to a head when he successfully gained a job offer from the political science department at Columbia University in a later stage of the circle. Within the core group, Marcuse and Lowenthal had a collaborative pair-type personal relationship and friendship in America where they both ended up becoming professors, although their success dates from well after the circle had disintegrated and Adorno and Horkheimer were back in academic positions in Germany. Clearly, however, the core collaborative pair in the circle was Adorno and Horkheimer during the quest stage; they were ready for the collective action stage of the circle life cycle by the end of the Second World War and the defeat of Hitler.

Collective Action Stage (1945-1950)

Pollock's role as the executive manager becomes central to the collective action stage of the circle, and in the case of the critical theorists I would place this stage in the years from 1945-1950. Although the circle had depended on grants as well as Weil's endowment for many years, this was a period of intense collective work around the various "studies in prejudice" projects that gave rise to numerous publications, most prominently *The Authoritarian Personality* study, published in 1950 while the circle operated from Los Angeles in collaboration a group of academic social psychologists whose empirical work was funded by the American Jewish Committee [Burston 1991]. The circle had, by this time, moved from their base at Columbia University to California.

Pollock, in particular, but also Horkheimer, were concerned with investing their resources in the stock market and real estate as well as giving out money to needy German refugees. They also learned the difficult art of grant-writing and institutionally sponsored research as they took the critical theory tradition developed in the 1930s and applied it to policy oriented research using quantitative methods and addressing questions of anti-Semitism, prejudice and the personality structure of the opponents of democracy in post-war America (the role of Paul Lazarsfeld is a fascinating piece of the picture, but we will leave this issue for another time). The academic reputation of the Horkheimer circle in the United States within mainstream social science circles was established and consolidated by collective action stage work combining German theory with American empirical methods and research grant money.

Disintegration/Individuation Stage (1950-1969)

These social psychological studies turned out to be the climax of collective work for the circle, for Adorno, Pollock and Horkheimer returned to Germany in 1950, and the circle effectively disintegrated. Lowenthal stayed at Berkeley in a traditional academic career as a sociologist of culture. Marcuse had been working for the US government agencies during the war and in the post war period until the Korean War, when he broke free of the sponsorship of the circle and a relative intellectual silence imposed by the requirements of US intelligence related employment. Marcuse was never as central to the core of the Frankfurt School as contemporary critical theorists often suggest; Wiggershaus's account makes clear how hesitant Horkheimer was regarding funding Marcuse. Horkheimer wanted Marcuse to take and stay in either government intelligence jobs or academic positions in order to ensure that the Institute's finances were secure, and Adorno clearly saw Marcuse as potential

competition [Wiggershaus 1994]. In any event, after the break-up of the circle, Marcuse entered a period of creative work that ran from publication of *Eros and Civilization* [Marcuse 1955] to *One Dimensional Man* [Marcuse 1964] and various writings, speeches and essays in the late 1960s that popularized the vision of the Frankfurt School on his way to becoming a major intellectual influence on, even a guru for, the New Left.

Adorno, in particular, as we discussed above, resented how Marcuse benefited from ideas arguably created by the circle, not by Marcuse alone, in the quest/creative work stage of 1934-1945. As Farrell has reminded us, collaborative circles often engage in emotional and difficult retrospective battles involving competing claims for intellectual credit, and the sniping between Adorno and Marcuse and Horkheimer, Adorno and Fromm should be understood partly in this light. Adorno even tried to prevent the Institute from helping promote Marcuse's work in Germany once he had become famous in the late 1950s and early 1960s in America. Horkheimer, by this stage, was no longer a political radical, and during the 1960s he opposed the anti-war movements of the Vietnam era as well as the radical political vision of Adorno's student Habermas, the intellectual who was to claim the mantle of critical theory in the academy during the 1980s and 1990s [Bronner 1994; Wiggershaus 1994]. In any case, by 1969 Adorno was dead and the circle was no longer. Fromm had been written out of the collective memory of the school by the time of social and political turmoil of the late 1960s and 1970s created an audience for the ideas of critical theory, particularly in America, but also among the New Left in Germany and worldwide. The origin myths of the school were consolidated, particularly in Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination* [Jay 1973]. Over the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s critical theory emerged as a school of thought particularly within radical philosophy, on the fringes of academic sociology and, most importantly within the new emerging fields of cultural and media studies.

Reunion Stage

If there was a reunion stage for the circle, it was not a happy ending in the form of a party or conference or a Simon and Garfunkel-like Central Park concert. Adorno and Horkheimer both died as the Frankfurt School was being discovered by the New Left generation, and they were both ambivalent about the political movements of the 1960s. Fromm's ties to the group were broken forever in the 1930s, a conflict aggravated by the fact that Marcuse had attacked Fromm for being a conservative in a celebrated exchange on Freudian theory in the democratic socialist journal *Dissent* in the mid-1950s [Richert 1986]. Lowenthal and Marcuse remained linked to each oth-

er, although they grew distant from the Institute. Both taught and influenced young scholars and intellectuals who would go on to become influential in the American academic and intellectual life, and these formal and informal teacher-student relations helped create the origin myths I have raised questions about here. Horkheimer, Pollock and Adorno remained close to the end.

The period of the 1970s through to today has been one where the history of the critical theorist has been written and re-written, their legacy contested, and the trademark “critical theory” expanded in its meaning to include various types of intellectually and culturally radical ideas that go far beyond the more limited meaning intended in Horkheimer’s vision for the circle. A relatively marginal collaborative circle had become a trademark intellectual perspective within the Western academy, a case study that raises a range of issues regarding how new ideas are created and diffused.

Towards a Theory of Collaborative Circles

Farrell’s model raises a number of provocative questions for the ways we might think about the history of critical theory. Below I will offer three problems with Farrell’s model based on my attempts to think about how it can be applied to the case of the Frankfurt School and other examples, leading to suggestions for further research based on some of Farrell’s ideas. The three problems involve 1) questions around the failure of circles and related issues of sampling procedures; 2) social structural dynamics and the need to theorize the relationship between material resources and the dynamics of collaborative circles; 3) the need for typologies of different types of collaborative circles. Let us briefly discuss each analytic angle on Farrell’s theory, and then end the paper with some broader theoretical considerations coming out of recent research in the sociology of ideas.

Failed Circles? Internal Processes and Sampling Procedures

Obviously one major problem with Farrell’s work is his selection criteria. It would be unhelpful to be too critical on this issue, for *Collaborative Circles* is an enormously detailed piece of scholarship based on first-rate and time-consuming historical research on the individuals and circles involved. Anyone who has done biographical research knows how labour intensive this work is, and it made sense for Farrell to study circles he knew and was interested in. I am sympathetic to the point that sociologists of ideas should be relatively agnostic about the value of the ideas they study and should choose cases on theoretical and methodological grounds

[Gross 2008]; in the real world of the intellectual world we live in, however, scholars are likely to be drawn to studies of intellectuals who capture their imagination and interest, and are reasonably well-known. Scholars do not study forgotten intellectuals, generally, because the career incentives are not there for this kind of study, except in unusual cases. Moreover, we are not likely to have material available on failed circles, while the successful collaborative circles gave rise to biographies, histories and well-kept archives. Despite the problems that flow from essentially sampling on the dependant value (successful circles), Farrell's work remains an excellent example of how one can benefit from combining biography and social science.

Clearly, however, an understanding of the full processes involved in creative work and friendship networks would require an account of circles that fail as well as those which succeed. Farrell's selection criteria involved picking cases of successful collaborative circles that we now know of, without systematically (he does have a chapter on a failed circle in his book, to be fair here) looking at failed circles. Clearly understanding how knowledge is created requires looking at both the successful and the unsuccessful networks of knowledge creators, just in the same way that the sociology of crime must look at criminals and non-criminals, as well as the larger structural and social context [McLaughlin 1998b]. A comprehensive intellectual agenda on creatively and new ideas would benefit from the systematic study of the patterns of when and where collaborative circles tend to form and under what conditions they both succeed and fail.

It would also be helpful to have case studies discussing the failure of alternative pathways even in circles that generally succeeded; the case of Fromm and Horkheimer represents an interesting example of a relationship that could well have turned out differently, something that would have a significant influence on the kind of critical theory we have inherited from this period. Horkheimer's relationship with Fromm clearly represents an example of a failed collaborative pair, something surely fairly common in both successful and (even more likely) in failed circles. While in the early 1930s Horkheimer's closest personal relationship within the network was with Pollock, Fromm and Horkheimer communicated regularly and were the two central intellectual figures in the emerging school. Horkheimer entrusted Fromm with the directorship of the central empirical social psychological project of the early Frankfurt School and put him on a permanent tenured faculty contract. They communicated regularly and in an instrumentally intimate way in this period of the circle. This potential collaborative pair, however, never really consolidated itself partly perhaps because of the fact that Fromm was often away from the Institute because of his recurring tuberculosis as well as other intellectual and professional (his psychoanalysis, in particular) commitments. Regular ritualized interactions are central to the

processes Farrell outlines and theorizes in *Collaborative Circles*; the relative lack of regular contact between Fromm and Horkheimer likely contributed to the shifting of Horkheimer's attention and interest towards Adorno throughout the later part of the 1930s. The emerging personal rift is evident in a letter Horkheimer wrote in the first few months of the Institute's time in America, where he opined:

(Fromm) does not particularly appeal to me. He has productive ideas, but he wants to be on good terms with too many people at once, and doesn't want to miss anything. It is quite pleasant to talk to him, but my impression is that is quite pleasant for very many people [quoted in Wheatland 2004a, 70].

Wheatland sees the conflict rightly as partly financial and partly personal, and Martin Jay [1973] famously emphasized an alleged stylistic difference between the core Frankfurt School thinkers and Fromm, who, it was suggested, lacked an ironic and aesthetic touch. The concept and theory of collaborative circles, in contrast to more traditional narrative histories, allows us to see this as a classic boundary conflict where Fromm was simply unwilling to merge his ideas and career with Horkheimer's vision for critical theory in ways that Pollock, Marcuse, Lowenthal and Adorno were willing to do. As Wheatland puts it:

Fromm was extremely outgoing and never hesitated to network with other scholars, and these personality traits enable him to become the institute's best known member during the early years at Columbia. Horkheimer, instead of enjoying the notoriety Fromm brought to the group, remained extremely suspicious of his associate [Wheatland 2004a, 70].

Wheatland has called this almost exactly right except when he suggests that Horkheimer's suspicions remained consistent from the early days to the break; I would only add an emphasis on how elements of these suspicions were actually *created* by the group dynamics of the collaborative circles itself.

A Structural Focus: Sociology of Intellectuals and Academics

To talk systematically about the dynamics of the internal processes and external contexts of the failure of collaborative circles would require a more structural focus than that outlined in Farrell's analysis. Farrell's book is a thoughtful, provocative and ever so detailed attempt to show how collaborative circles emerge by stressing biographical and historical details. Theorizing why, where, and when collaborative circles emerge however, would require a more structural analysis.

Most of Farrell examples are from art and literature, although his chapter on the early Freudians and the Ultra's (activists fighting for the vote for women in the United

States) illustrates his ambition to potentially apply his model to the social sciences, the sciences and politics. The question that I would want to ask is what does the literature in the sociology of science, culture, professions and organizations suggest that would help us predict patterns regarding where collaborative circles are more or less likely to emerge? Drawing on the structural focus outlined in Bourdieu's field theory [Bourdieu 1984], Randall Collins's sociology of philosophies [Collins 1998] or Stephan Fuchs's sociology of knowledge and culture [Fuchs 2000], we would need to think through how to test theories on the emergence of collaborative circles in distinct institutional contexts.

It seems likely that collaborative circles would be least likely in highly centralized fields that require large investments of resources in order to do cutting edge creative work – high energy psychics or astronomy would likely be fields where strong teacher-student networks would be required for intellectual progress, at least in the modern period. Creative work among artists, poets and musicians are likely to represent fields where it is more possible to carve out space for innovative rebels without mentors and major financial support, thus explaining the emphasis on artists and writers in Farrell's theory. Collaborative circles in the social sciences, humanities and among political movements would seem likely to occupy an intermediate space between the rapid discovery sciences and the creative arts. A key element to any broader theory of the institutional context for understanding the emergence, failure and success would be to theorize systematically the ways in which resources shape the formation of budding network of creative thinkers, cultural workers or scholars.

The Frankfurt School network was really quite distinct from the collaborative circles which Farrell has studied and theorized primarily because of the control of money that was highly centralized in the hands of Horkheimer and to a lesser extent Pollock. This issue raises questions whether critical theory represents a classical collaborative theory at all. Conflicts within the Frankfurt School were not simply emotionally invested battles over ideas, credit for intellectual contributions or principled intellectual disagreements over a vision for a new type of knowledge or theory but were, to a very large extent, conflicts over weakly formalized and patriarchally controlled but legally binding access to resources. Lowenthal, for example, broke with the Institute in later years partly due to the distance from Berkeley to Frankfurt, but also due to a conflict over his claim over a pension from the Institute. The distance that developed between Marcuse and the network over the years was very largely due to the fact that Horkheimer was hesitant to give financial support to Marcuse and Adorno was competing with Marcuse. Before Marcuse became famous outside the network of the critical theorists in the late 1950s and early 1960s, gaining himself university appointments at Brandeis and the University of California, he had wanted

to become a core member of the Frankfurt School network. Horkheimer (as well as Adorno, it must be said, since they were immediate competitors for resources), on the other hand, wanted Marcuse to work for the US government or get an academic job in order to limit the financial commitments of the Institute. To take another example, we have already discussed how the break between Fromm and the network was partly a legal conflict over money, tenure contracts and severance pay, something more common in formalized bureaucracies than in informal collaborative circles. It is clear, furthermore, that there was formality in the ways that the Frankfurt School network participants addressed Horkheimer in particular; this was partly due to German academic culture but this pattern of interpersonal relations does not fit the generally informal pattern of interactions central to Farrell's analysis. The Frankfurt School, as a form of social organization, was not a formal academic department or a bureaucratic think-tank nor was it a classical collaborative circle.

Putting aside for a moment, the nature of the Frankfurt School itself as a collaborative circle, it is clear that the theory itself requires more attention to resources and the formation of collaborative circles. The funding sources available to different forms of cultural production, the degree of centralization in a field and the "reputational autonomy" of a field (how professionalized, market oriented or politicized is a field?) [Whitley 1984] will dramatically change the life-course of circles, the relationship between the stages and their order and length. These types of factors call for an agenda that can specify different types of circles.

A Typology of Different Types of Circles

The Critical Theorists are an example of a circle that was linked to an Institution (Frankfurt University, then Columbia University, and then Frankfurt University again) and had an independent source of resources (money from a rich radical). It would be useful to try to identify other examples of collaborative circles that controlled resources in order to refine Farrell's research agenda – needless to say, however, it is probably fairly unusual for rebellious intellectuals in their 20s to have access to major sources of money as a collectivity. More generally, Farrell's theory would benefit from systematic attention to looking for patterns with regards to the frequency and nature of circles in distinct institutional contexts and fields. The funding mechanisms and market dynamics that operate in the art world and in Farrell's case study on the French Impressionists, for example, are quite different from the funding resources available for the movement activists Farrell also discusses in *Collaborative Circles* in his chapter on the early feminist movement. The resources dynamics are different still

again in the Freudian movement case study Farrell addresses in this book; cultural workers in the psychoanalytic movement made their living from individual therapy or working in hospitals, mental health faculties or for the government. The unusual funding arrangement that helped create the Frankfurt School as we have come to know it clearly shaped the dynamics of the life course of the circle, and this calls for further research with a larger number of different types of circles.

Another question to address when classifying types of circles involves the occupation of the cultural workers and intellectuals involved. The case that I have offered here on the Frankfurt School is an example of a circle where the major participants operated in different fields (politics, philosophy, music and social criticism, social science) not simply the same one as was the case with the French Impressionists who basically were all painters. The Neo-Freudian theorists and the CCNY network of New York intellectuals in America during the 1930s represent two other interesting examples of collaborative circles that emerged when the participants were not involved or oriented to the same formalized field or profession. Farrell's model could usefully be applied to the networks of both the Neo-Freudians (Harry Stack Sullivan, Karen Horney and Fromm, a collaborative of therapists and theorists), and the overlapping "cultural and personality" group, (involving Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, and a number of psychologists) two of the most influential circles of the Twentieth century. These are examples of circles that emerge in relationship to the occupation of therapists, psychologists and anthropology professors respectively.

The collaborative circle associated with the City University of New York intellectuals that include Daniel Bell, Irving Howe, Seymour Martin Lipset and Irving Kristol that began when these individuals were young anti-Stalinist undergraduate students and activists was also clearly created partly by the ritualized interactions, collaborative pairing, instrumental intimacy, intellectual rebellion and breaks with mentors central to Farrell's theory. This network, however, did not go through the same stages of development partly because the individuals involved went out to become professionals in very distinct fields (intellectual journalism for the young Daniel Bell and Irving Howe and for Irving Kristol throughout his career, and academics for Lipset and Bell and Howe later in life). Political differences and formal and intense involvement in very distinct political movements and activities (the socialist and neo-conservative movements, in these examples) also guaranteed that a CCNY circle would not emerge in the ways Farrell discusses with his case studies, something that was also true with the initial Frankfurt School network where communist activism on the part of some of the participants led to the abortion of the circle before the quest stage. Political movements and sects are greedy institutions, in Lewis Coser's terms, which tend to make it difficult for more informal collaborative circles to form

and survive. The CCNY circle did not share enough in common to form a coherent circle with a distinctive vision, but some of the same micro-level dynamics occurred in this circle as we saw in the kind of circles Farrell has studied, suggesting that one could use many of his insights without accepting the stage theory and the search for a common definition of a collaborative circle.

The Frankfurt School example, I argue, allows us to think comparatively regarding a typology of sociological distinct types of collaborative circles to guide further research. The Frankfurt School represents a case where the school had an independent source of income, at least for awhile, calling for us to think systemically about other examples of quasi-think tank oriented cases of collaborative circles. The Frankfurt School was also an example of a network that shared a general left-wing orientation in its early years. They relied on later historians and promoters of the school to muddy the waters of the political complexity of the group (a number of them ended their lives politically conservative, certainly not radical) since the audience for critical theory today is largely left-wing academics and cultural workers associated with the humanities, social scientists, and networks in and around the arts. More generally, the collaborative circles theory would likely be illuminating for research on networks of intense political commitments from both the left and the right, the sect-like political groups Lewis Coser wrote about (and experienced!) [Coser 1965]. It may well be that the original circle of Marxist intellectuals around Lukacs would be one of the most intellectually productive collaborative circles to study, since it is a far more pure example of a non-academic circle and, is arguably the source of many of the original ideas that went into the Frankfurt School vision in the first place [conversation with Thomas Wheatland, August 2008].

Finally, the Frankfurt School was an example of a distinct type of collaborative circle that emerged from a group of academics even though the school does not fit easily in one academic discipline or theoretical school of thought that existed at the time. In some ways then, the critical theorists sociologically resemble early networks of post-structuralist intellectuals, or the collaborative circles responsible for the emergence of rational choice Marxism or socialist feminist theory – some kind of hybrid between a collaborative circle and a dissident academic paradigm. Hopefully this kind of typology building can further the integration of a modified version of Farrell's model into biographically oriented case studies undertaken by biographers and historians outside of sociology proper, bringing value-added to the space where sociology meets biography. And as the number of case studies increase, we could then return to Farrell's theory, revising and modifying the theoretical framework as need be.

Conclusion: Hybrid Forms of Intellectual Networks

Using the history of the Frankfurt School as empirical material, I have made the case for thinking about the use of Michael Farrell's theory of collaborative circles as a way to think about how we might combine history, biography and social science in the development of a sociology of ideas. We have shown similarities between the dynamics of the collaborative circles Farrell has studied and the network of critical theorists around Max Horkheimer, an exercise that raises new questions about the traditional accounts of the Frankfurt School's origins, development and history. Friendship dynamics, processes of instrumental intimacy, behavior linked to particular roles (executive manager, peacekeeper, lightning rods) and boundary maintaining dynamics related to the formation of a group identity among the critical theorists were shown to be usefully illuminated by the theoretical concepts outlined in Farrell's *Collaborative Circles* [Farrell 2001]. This case study also raises questions regarding whether intellectual creativity comes from relatively unbroken teacher student ties as suggested by Frickel and Gross, Randall Collins and Nicholas Mullins [Frickel and Gross 2005; Collins 1998; Mullins 1973]. Alternatively, are rebellious innovators who move beyond intellectual orthodoxies first by breaking from their mentors more important to intellectual creativity than is suggested by the existing literature [Farrell 2001; McLaughlin 2001]?

It is clear, however, that the Frankfurt School network does not fit the collaborative circle model in its classical form as outlined in Farrell, suggesting the need to think about hybrid forms of networks through the use of alternative theoretical frameworks. An obvious alternative way of thinking about the Frankfurt School is offered by the model developed by Scott Frickel and Neil Gross's *American Sociological Review* article "Towards a General Theory of Scientific/Intellectual Movements" [Frickel and Gross 2005]. This piece, likely to become a classic, offers a broad ranging and analytically useful proposal for general theory that can structure and orient empirical research in the sociology of ideas. Rooted in the assumptions of the "strong program" in the sociology of science, case study literature in the new sociology of ideas and social movement theory, Frickel and Gross draw from a range of empirical illustrations in the history of science, philosophy and social sciences to in order to make a compelling case for the concept of "Scientific Intellectual Movements" (SIMs). Their general theory of the SIM offers us a way into conceptualizing how paradigmatic and institutional change occurs in the academic field since the scientific revolution of the Seventeenth century.

For Frickel and Gross, SIMs are "collective efforts to pursue research programs or projects for thought in the face of resistance from others in the scientific or intel-

lectual community” [*ibidem*, 206]. Frickel and Gross then propose four propositions meant to stimulate the empirical research they argue will lead to a general theory of SIMs, the most important one being that “A SIM is more likely to emerge when high-status intellectual actors harbor complaints against what they understand to be the central intellectual tendencies of the day” [*ibidem*, 209]. The Frankfurt School network was not a composed of particularly high status actors, as we have shown, but I would argue that the Frankfurt School network represents both a certain kind of SIM, as well as a collaborative circle. It was a hybrid form that was part informal network, and part social movement even sect-like political perspective while also having many of the characteristics of the dissident academic schools of thought central to the theory of SIMs.

The value of the SIM approach for thinking about critical theory is the way this theoretical agenda highlights the academic nature of the Frankfurt School. Despite the Marxist rhetoric in the origins of the school and the rebellious and informal dynamics we have discussed, ultimately the critical theory network has much in common with dissident academic schools of thought. Frickel and Gross emphasize the fact that SIMs tend to be founded by tenured senior professors with career security and access to resources that academic outsiders seldom possess. The unusual case of the Frankfurt School network who had access to large sums of money because of the politically motivated philanthropy of a wealthy German is the exception, it seems, that helps prove Frickel and Gross’s general rule.⁶ In the contemporary period one would be hard-pressed to think of a similar situation in modern democratic societies where significant amount of research money are distributed outside the normal channels of elite controlled peer reviewed foundation support – perhaps networks supported by George Soros was the closet contemporary example that might give rise to networks of scholars that are not constituted in the ways Frickel and Gross suggest [Trilupaityte and McLaughlin 2008]. Complementary to Farrell’s approach that stresses informal relations and the origins of creativity, Frickel and Gross give us a model that can help us think seriously about resource mobilization and framing

⁶ Recent research on the Frankfurt School network may end up taking us even closer to the SIM model, since Horkheimer did have powerful academic supporters at Frankfurt University, something that perhaps has been underestimated in the literature because of the image of the critical theorists as courageous outsiders that suited their reception in the 1960s. Moreover, the personal relationship that Horkheimer developed with Weil, the sponsor of the circle, could well have been a key determining factor in the story, suggesting that Horkheimer was not as much of a peer to the rest of the network as I have emphasized, although he certainly was not a mentor in a traditional sense despite being a few years older than most of the network (for the most recent historical account see Abromet 2004. It might be useful to conceptualize Horkheimer as the leader of an unusual example of a SIM. I owe insights into these complexities to a recent conversation with Thomas Wheatland, whose forthcoming book [Wheatland 2009] will be an essential source for scholars interested in the history of critical theory.

dynamics in the formation of a school of thought that had enormous resonance in the scholarly environment in the West from the 1950s through to today.

There are, to be sure, aspects of the SIM theory that are not fully adequate in theorizing the case of the Frankfurt School. For one thing, I would argue that the Frickel and Gross model is more appropriately seen as a theory of Academic Intellectual Movements in societies that have gone through the academic revolution discussed by Jencks and Riesman, given the stress Frickel and Gross put on traditional tenure (a particularly Twentieth century North American phenomena, in any case – even today the highly politicized academic context in Russia and China requires a different analytic lens) as a central resource in the formation of alternative intellectual movements. The success of the Frankfurt School, in contrast, largely came out of resources provided from outside the academic system itself, and the scholarship of the circle would never have gained the influence it did during the 1970s without the social movements of the 1960s, activism that was largely non-academic; Frickel and Gross leave room, of course, for the outside environment in their model but their theory emphasizes processes internal to the academic field. Moreover, the Frankfurt School were not really a *scientific* intellectual movement at all, just as the artistic circles Farrell bases his theory around were also not rooted in a scientific model of epistemology or social organization. Indeed, a key fault-line of conflict in the Frankfurt School network was precisely between a social philosophy approach skeptical of science emphasized by Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, and a more social scientific orientation that might have prevailed had Fromm, Neumann and Kirchheimer remained central.

Farrell's theory adds a range of insights into the formation of networks of creative thinkers in ways that usefully supplement the SIM approach. While Frickel and Gross talk theoretically about micro-mobilization contexts central to the formation of dissident and creative networks of thinkers, Farrell's research on collaborative circles provides a rich wealth of leads and insights that could stimulate further research into the micro-processes that create new ideas and creative innovations. Moreover, while Gross's notion of intellectual identity opens up space for social psychological analysis of intellectual networks [Gross 2008], Farrell's concepts of instrumental intimacy and collaborative pairs and his focus on psychoanalytically influenced theories of identity merger and the intellectual conflict that flows from breaks in idealization among formerly close friendship relationships provides theoretical insights worth building on. It could well be that further synthesis of Frickel and Gross, Farrell and some of the structural perspectives I have briefly alluded to in this piece could shed new light into how we understand both the emergence of critical theory itself and the larger issues of creativity, innovation and the formation of dissident intellectual traditions and formal academic schools of thought. This is not the place and time to attempt to fully

synthesize Farrell's model with the SIM perspective, but this exploration of critical theory as a collaborative circle in light of these theoretical considerations hopefully provides a useful jumping-off point for further analysis in the sociology of ideas.

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Collaborative Circles and Their Discontents

Revisiting Conflict and Creativity in Frankfurt School Critical Theory

Abstract: This paper combines historical and biographical work on the Frankfurt School of critical theorists with a sociological approach to intellectual creativity outlined in Michael Farrell's provocative book *Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics and Creative Work*. Revisiting earlier research on the often unheralded role the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm played in the early years of the critical theory tradition, the paper reviews the theory of collaborative circles outlined by Farrell, applies this social science explanation of conflict and creativity to the Frankfurt School network of Horkheimer, Fromm, Adorno, Marcuse, Lowenthal etc. and suggests a new way of thinking about the history of this innovative and controversial group of social theorists and researchers. The paper concludes by suggesting revisions to the Farrell model of collaborative circles and compares and contrasts the strengths of the theory to the "scientific intellectual movements" approach outlined by Frickel and Gross.

Keywords: creativity, collaborative circles, Frankfurt School, critical theory, scientific intellectual movements.

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