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Towards a Sociology of Ideas: A Response to the Comments

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by Neil McLaughlin

It is a both a pleasure and intellectually productive to respond to and dialogue with these three thoughtful comments on my "Collaborative circles and their discontents" essay on conflict and creativity in the early Frankfurt School. There are a number of points that I must concede and commit to address in the next version of my work on collaborative circles and on the critical theorists. I will begin by discussing a couple of these "on the mark" points while thanking the respondents for their care and intellectual engagement. I will then say a few brief things about the vitally important question raised in Michael Farrell's comments about the importance of the larger fields in which collaborative circles operate while clarifying and expanding on specifics regarding the case of Fromm, particularly with his relationship to Marxism, psychoanalysis, and the 1960s. Finally, I will conclude with a few short remarks on some of the key issues this exchange highlights for future research in the sociology of ideas and creativity.

Matteo Bortolini is certainly right that the story I have attempted to narrate and theorize here requires more engagement with diverse historical material, and this surely must include more work in archives. Moreover, Bortolini's invoking of the examples of Eric Voegelin, Hannah Arendt, and Leo Strauss highlights for us the unquestionable value of seeing the story of Fromm and the Frankfurt School as part of a larger story of European refugees in America. And Michael Farrell's deep and hard won empirical knowledge of the dynamics of dozens of circles allows him to remind us that there are numerous cases (he cites Cezanne the painter, Alan

Tate the poet, and Lucy Stone the Nineteenth century feminist as examples) where dissident members of collaborative circles are eventually re-integrated into the core intellectual vision and networks of creative collaborative circles. More must be said in order to explain why this reintegration was not possible for the early Frankfurt School, suggesting the need for a more fine-grained look at the critical theorists in America in the years 1933-1939 (we will see some of this when Lawrence Freidman's biography of Fromm is published over the next couple of years). Neil Gross is also surely right that "there are many thinkers, who were, over time, edged out of the groups of which they were originally important members, a process with significant consequences both for their own thought and for the institutional and intellectual trajectories of the groups in question." The case I have offered remains suggestive but unfinished in terms of historical reconstruction and theoretical comparison, so I thank the commentators for helping me work out a clearer path for some of my research in the next few years.

Michael Farrell's argument about the importance of embedding an analysis of collaborative circles in the larger context of the wider fields in which they operate will surely demand a large number of these research years. Fortunately I have gotten a head-start on this research so want to respond with a clarification and some preliminary thoughts on the important larger question about intellectual fields that have been posed. It is important to remember that contrary to our historical memory of Fromm today, the case of his relationship with the Frankfurt School network is not analogous to examples of now obscure drummers who were kicked out of rock bands on the eve of the musicians becoming famous. These *are* examples where cultural producers and intellectuals are purged from a network before it gains fame and influence, leaving behind a marginalized, not a forgotten, intellectual, but this represents a different kind of case. Fromm did indeed find wind-spread acceptance for his ideas within the fields of sociology, psychology, psychoanalysis and within the public intellectual elite in the 1940s and 1950s. He is a forgotten not an unsuccessful intellectual since he was central to creating the intellectual approach that later became known as the authoritarian personality research tradition [Adorno 1950; Bonns 1984], his book *Escape from Freedom* [Fromm 1941] was influential in sociology in the 1940s and 1950s (Merton taught the book at Columbia), he played a pivotal role in the development of David Riesman's analysis of the "lonely crowd" [McLaughlin 2001b] and I have documented that he was widely cited in the 1940s and 1950s [McLaughlin 1998a; McLaughlin 1998b]. The interesting sociological question is why was this intellectual history that I and other scholars have documented [Bonss 1984; Bronner 1994; Burston 1991; McLaughlin 1999] was forgottens? The answer to this riddle does indeed involve, as Farrell suggests, wider dynamics beyond the Frankfurt School network.

From my perspective, an answer to this question involves both the importance of the specific type of intellectual social movements represented by Marxism and psychoanalysis as well as the politics of particular periods of history, in this case the 1960s. Following in the tradition two great American sociologists, Lewis Coser and Alvin Gouldner, let me first say a few things about Fromm and the intellectual context of mid-Twentieth century Marxism and psychoanalysis. In contrast to the largely academic "scientific intellectual movements" that Frickel and Gross have provocatively theorized, Coser suggests that Marxism and psychoanalysis are intellectual movements that are organized in a highly creative but sect-like manner [Coser 1965]. In addition, as Gouldner [1980, 168] puts it, Marxism is a "theory" a "grammar" and a "historically evolving culture and social structure." The same could be said about the Freudian movement – it is a theory, grammar, culture, *and* social structure. I would argue that in the 1960s Fromm was rejected by many elite intellectuals and scholars and became a symbol of both mushy humanistic Marxism and naïve Americanized Freudianism partly because of his role in bringing to the fore what Alvin Gouldner once called the "nightmare" of intellectual systems such as Marxism. It is in the very nature of the forms of intellectual production such as Marxism and psychoanalysis to reproduce themselves in a comprehensive and totalizing manner; there are, however, deep contradictions and anomalies within such traditions that are always close to the surface, and emerge in nightmare forms as internal critics push the problems as well as the insights of the theory. Michael Farrell hints at this kind of analysis when he refers to the "anxieties or internal conflicts that *haunted* the Frankfurt School" (my emphasis), but I think Coser and Gouldner help us understand these issues in useful ways.

Marxism, of course, was an influential intellectual system in the depression dominated era of 1930s when Fromm was a young man, and we live again in a period time when the world economics crisis is likely to bring back the intellectual viability of certain versions of Marxist social theory that highlight the instability of unregulated markets, the destructive dynamics of greed set in motion by capitalism, the power of financial capital and the role of a bourgeois state in propping up a system that is not organized with regard to the interests of the global poor and the working and middle classes of advanced industrial societies. Fromm was identified with the broad Marxist tradition, even though he made no major original contributions to political economy, state theory or world systems theory. He is important to the Marxist traditions, however, because he insisted that any Marxist tradition worth engaging with must have a humanistic vision at the center of its vision. Fromm contributed greatly to the revitalization of mid-century Marxism by popularizing the early Marx and the links between Marxism and Hegel and critiquing vulgar versions of Marxism represented

by Stalinists and Althusserians [Fromm 1956; Fromm 1964; Fromm 1976]. Fromm was thus one of the most articulate critics from inside the Marxist movement who spoke with the same grammar from within the theory but pointed out, in no uncertain terms, the holes and the blindness of Marxism when interpreted as a closed insular intellectual system. This is, of course, is a nightmare not an insight for those true believers committed to maintaining Marxism as a science or a semi-religious dogma.

This dynamic helps explain the enormous hostility to Fromm that existed within both the critical theory network but also within the broader Marxist tradition; this, in turn, helps explain the ways he became forgotten among intellectuals since the 1960s when Marxism entered the academic and discourse of the New Left generation. As opposed to approaching Marxism as a closed dogma and a science, Fromm viewed the tradition as a series of insights and ideas that should be modified and developed in engagement with both the Freudian emphasis on the irrational and emotions and a wider sociological literature that forces the tradition outside of a self-enclosed intellectual system. Fromm was hated by Marxists inside the tradition for *precisely* this reason, something that can be seen in it clearest form in the most dogmatic critiques of his work from Soviet scholars [Dobrenkov 1976]. This was also echoed by the attacks on Fromm by some of the most prominent intellectuals influential within the New Left generation, including the young Adorno and the later Herbert Marcuse [Jay 1973; Marcuse 1955; Richart 1986; Wiggerhaus 1994; Wheatland 2004a; Wheatland 2004b].

A similar dynamic existed with the networks and organizations of the Freudian movement. The Freudian movement once it established itself was not simply a collaborative circle or a scientific intellectual movement but was, like Marxism, a "theory" a "grammar" and a "historically evolving culture and social structure" [Gouldner 1980, 168]. When one looks at the intellectual history and organizational dynamics of the psychoanalytic movement over the Twentieth century in this light, it becomes clear that Fromm was hated so passionately among Freudians not because he rejected the core insights of the tradition in favour of a naïve Americanized version of psychoanalysis, but *precisely* because his ideas hit the raw nerve of the worst "nightmare" for orthodox Freudians. Psychoanalysis is an essential intellectual contribution to our tool-kit of social theory, something, by the way, that Farrell's *Collaborative Circles* [Farrell 2001] book illustrates with his original and provocative discussion of the psychodynamic of creative intellectual work. There *is* an unconscious, and people are indeed motivated by irrational passions, deeply rooted motivating forces and complex psychological mechanisms that social science must take into account by any serious social science [McLaughlin 2007]. Nonetheless, Fromm was rejected so passionately by Twentieth century Freudians, something essential to the sociological

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forgetting of his insights, not because he rejected psychoanalytic insights but because he was a Freudian who accepted core elements of the theory while rejecting others. Fromm argued that a psychoanalysis rooted in Nineteenth century mechanistic instinct theories and organized as a quasi-religious true-believer sect is an intellectual dead-end that can not be rescued by the mind-numbing intricacies of the various warring versions of the tradition, lead by new intellectual heroes such as Lacan and other "dissident" keepers of the orthodox flame. Since the elements of psychoanalysis that Fromm rejected were both core elements of the identity of the tradition and the least plausible elements of the theory, Fromm's critique hit on the nightmare that the Freudian movement always had to repress: that orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis was intellectually unviable.

In my view then, the story of how the work of the Frankfurt School was received in the wider intellectual world beyond the collaborative circles in which it was conceived must, as Farrell suggests, give an account of the world of Marxism and psychoanalysis as well as highlighting the kinds of academic dynamics, structural processes and teacher-student relations outlined in Frickel and Gross's theory of "scientific intellectual movements," Gross' analysis of the making of Richard Rorty, and Matteo Bortolini's exciting agenda on the intellectual fate of the followers of Parsons. This type of analysis, however, also must theoretically reintegrate the importance of the "climate of the times" or the "Zeitgeist," something that was too often done in the past with the kind of "vague and woolly sociologically-inflected intellectual history" Neil Gross rightly rejects.

In this particular case, for example, the story of how Fromm lost his reputation in the 1960s cannot be told or understood focusing exclusively on collaborative circles, scientific intellectual movements or the "theory groups" analysed in earlier by Nicholas Mullins; we *must* come to grips with the historical experience and cultural framework than existed for intellectuals and scholars in the 1960s despite the dangers that thinking about the Sixties holds for sociologists interested in scholarship not generational mythology [for a useful discussion of the trope of the Sixties as a mythology that often gets in the way of analysis see Townsley 2001]. I am on the edge here of slipping back into the just the kind of "ideology critique" that Neil Gross rightly suggests I should expunge from my contributions to the "sociology of ideas" so I will quit while I am (barely) ahead on this point. I will only say that we must theorize intellectual networks as open systems that are shaped in powerful ways by larger historical forces beyond networks and organizations, something that has to be addressed head-on even though the future of the field clearly lies in just the kind of narrower and more manageable questions that sociologists of ideas can reasonably accomplish in specific and manageable research projects.

I will conclude then with suggesting a couple of core issues this exchange suggests for the direction of the sociology of ideas. First, Bortolini is right that the question of whether the Frankfurt School is a collaborative circle or a scientific intellectual movement is not the most useful sociological issue. The more interesting question is when we look at specific intellectual traditions, disciplines or networks of thinkers, which theory helps us explain and understand the dynamics in the most productive way and how can our theories be modified by the empirical results of our case studies? As much as Randall Collins [1998] has moved the field forward and given us a framework in his magisterial *The Sociology of Philosophy*, Neil Gross is right, I think, that the way forward is just the kind of inductive and historically detailed studies that Gross, Charles Camic and Michael Farrell have been doing, a tradition that will be expanded on when Matteo Bortolini's work on Robert Bellah and the Parsons network is published.

My sense is furthermore, that there will be rich possibilities for studying cases that fall between the pure "teacher-student" networks stressed by Mullins, Collins, and Frickel and Gross and the rebels without mentors model highlighted in *Collaborative Circles*. It is helpful even essential to study *both* the origins of creative work, on the one hand, and the very different question of the reception of ideas and scholarly reputations, a distinction that Collin's great work on the sociology of philosophy has unfortunately helped blur. I think it is certainly the case, as Michael Farrell suggests, that the issue of whether insights and creative work are largely born in the center of established intellectual established networks or in a space of what I have elsewhere called "optimal marginality" [McLaughlin 2001] is an empirical question that should be studied inductively using a variety of theories, including the "scientific intellectual movement" and "collaborative circles" approaches.

Finally, we must respond to the challenge that Bortolini rightly puts on the table for us: sociologists of ideas must put the content of ideas as a key dependant variable for us to explain. Farrell and Gross have indeed made contributions to this project both in *Becoming Richard Rorty* [Gross 2008] and *Collaborative Circles* [Farrell 2001]. In some recent work, I have tried to suggest both how the social structure and history of the discipline of sociology in Canada shapes its institutional strength and how the social organization of sociology and economics shapes the ways these distinct disciplines do public academic work [McLaughlin 2005; McLaughlin and Turcotte 2007], but in both cases I have not really focused on the content of ideas as the dependant variable. But I agree with Bortolini here that both in my discussion of the critical theorists and in the wider field of the sociology of ideas, far more work must be done to fulfill our promise of linking social structure and (Michael Farrell's *Collaborative Circles* reminds us) small group behaviour and interpersonal dynamics,

to the *content* of ideas. We are only at the beginning of this exciting agenda, so for now I must only thank *Sociologica* for making this exchange possible, and say that I look forward to continuing the exciting work of the sociology of ideas and creativity in this spirit of empirical rigour and theoretical openness exemplified by the participants in this dialogue.

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Towards a Sociology of Ideas: A Response to the Comments

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.

Neil McLaughlin teaches sociological theory at McMaster University, in Hamilton Ontario, Canada. He works in the areas of culture, intellectuals and the sociology of creativity. His most recent publications include: "George Orwell, the Academics and the Literary Intellectuals," pp 160-178 in John Rodden (editor), *Cambridge Companion to Orwell*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, "The Trouble with Burawoy: an analytic synthetic alternative," (with Kerry Turcotte), *Sociology* 41:5:813-828:2007, and "The Canada Research Chair Program and Social Science Reward Structures," (with Kyle Siler), *The Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie*, 45.1 2008: 93-119. He is presently writing about the financial speculator and public intellectual George Soros as well as the issue of public sociology and public intellectuals in Canada.