Matteo Bortolini
Comment on Neil McLaughlin/1

Ente di afferenza:
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by Matteo Bortolini

Neil McLaughlin's paper, *Collaborative Circles and Their Discontents* [McLaughlin 2008], is a welcome contribution to the sociology of knowledge or, as we prefer to call it today, the sociology of ideas [Camic and Gross 2001]. McLaughlin reworks in imaginative and conceptually sound way some of the theoretical suggestions and hints of Michael Farrell's *Collaborative Circles* [Farrell 2001], putting some of his own work on the Frankfurt School under scrutiny while supplementing his previous interpretations with new points of view. This circular re-working of a well-known (for McLaughlin) theme adds depth and understanding to our comprehension of both the history of the Frankfurt School – a commendable goal in itself – and the dynamics of intellectual groups. In my brief comment, I will first highlight some of the places in which McLaughlin interpretation and application of Farrell's concepts enlarge our understanding of intellectual and academic dynamics. I will then rise a more general, and critical, question about the sociology of knowledge and the way it is interpreted and practiced today.

To begin with, Neil McLaughlin *caveat* for a deeper understanding of the material dimension of collaborative groups and, more in general, of academic and intellectual life is undoubtely to be welcomed: As McLaughlin underlines, material problems and dynamics are not secondary elements for understanding the constitution, the development, and the fission of a group of intellectuals. It seems safe to affirm that in *Collaborative Circles* the material dimension remains hidden from view most of the time, and that a more complete assessment of the difficulties in the organization of the

Salon des Refusés or in the creation of the Fugitive Poets journal would have added depth and context to Farrell's analysis of micro-level social relations. It could be said, on the other hand, that Farrell's quite strict definitional choices created, maybe involuntarily, some kind of a *ceteris paribus* clause, for most of the groups he studied in *Collaborative Circles* were formed by young intellectuals, artists, or political activists who lacked any access to wealth and monetary resources. They had, then, to create their own symbolic and social capital by other means, and in the process gave rise to distinctive works of art, recognizable literary styles, or *avant garde* political ideas.

In this sense, the Frankfurt School is peculiar – one would even say decidedly unique – in the many and different structural challenges it had to face. Not only the Institute was constituted thanks to a grant left by "the son of a wealthy German grain merchant," but its members had to leave Germany to escape Nazi persecution. The Institute had, then, to find another "safe haven" – first Columbia University, then Los Angeles – to carry on its work. As McLaughlin describes the strategies the Institute used to secure its money and create a new social capital in America, one would only like to read more (and more diverse) historical material to supplement this abridged description. The point is that the group dimension, as underlined by McLaughlin in his paper, seems crucial to understand the paths taken by the individuals, both in themselves and in a comparative way – for example, *vis à vis* the difficulties encountered by other eminent German *emigrés*. Think, for example, of Eric Voegelin. In his quest for an academic job, Voegelin sought to activate his "Austrian" social capital and in 1938 (at 37) he was given a one-year instructorship at Harvard University thanks to the good auspices of Joseph Schumpeter and Gottfried von Haberler [Voegelin 1989]. There he met Talcott Parsons, with whom had an intense, if short, relationship which involved both intellectual and material exchanges. An analysis of their mutual correspondence – and of their "triangulation" with Alfred Schütz – shows the complex management of impression and the "face games" into which Voegelin and Schütz were drawn due to their low status within the American academic world. Academic politeness and a clear understanding of power relations can not hide the deep disagreements between Voegelin's and Parsons' intepretations of the Protestant Reformation, the meaning of national-socialism, and Parsons' quarrel with Schütz [see Rehorick and Buxton 1988; Bortolini 2000]. Voegelin then moved to the university of Alabama and, then again, to Lousiana State University before going back to Germany in 1958. Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss come immediately to mind as other candidates to such a comparison [see Young-Bruhel 1982; Kielmansegg *et al*. 1995].

Second, McLaughlin's observations about the importance of failed circles are decidedly important, even if failed circles are, by definition, difficult to locate and

follow. Moreover, it seems to me that some empirical focus on "failed collaborative pairs" would reveal their importance for the definition of identities and symbolic boundaries both at the individual and the collective level. In other words, I would *not* anticipate that the sheer failure of a relationship would end up in *less* creativity: Often the resentment caused by a breakup, or the mere undestanding of a fundamental difference, may result in a burst of ideas, new intuitions, or even a dramatic change of direction that is inexplicable by intellectual reasons alone. This might be true for broken mentor-protégé – that is, broken *vertical* – relationships, such as those between Horkheimer and Cornelius or those between Fromm and Alfred Weber.[1] Breakups may have many personal, structural, and intellectual explanations that might account for many decisions and intellectuals "products." In this sense, Farrell's model and the Frickel and Gross' model of scientific intellectual movements [Frickel and Gross 2005] could be fruitfully used as contrasting idealtypes, as McLaughlin suggests. In my view, then, most of the suggestions advanced by Neil McLaughlin to refine and complete Farrell's work are up to the point and could help researchers to get a fuller and more nuanced picture of their objects of study.

This said, a big doubt remains: Does McLaughlin's paper(s) still pertain to the sociology of ideas? The question might seem otiose – after all, papers (and ideas) are to be judged for their intrinsic value, not for their disciplinary or sub-disciplinary coherence and "fitness." Yet, all the points that I have highlighted – the importance of the material *milieu*, broken mentor-protégé relationships, the importance of applying Farrell's and Frickel-Gross' models to the history of the Institute for Social Research – only retain their sociological meaning if the history of the Frankfurt School is read in a typical "sociology of knowledge" fashion in which ideas are held to be the *dependent* variable. From a strictly sociological point of view it is not interesting, I think, to decide if the Institute was more akin to a collaborative circle (Farrell) or a scientific intellectual movement (Frickel and Gross), or if, say, Max Horkheimer was a mere organizational leader, a projective figure, or a creative intellectual. All these are descriptive questions which do not answer to questions that might pertain to the sociology of ideas: How did the complex relationships between Fromm, Horkheimer, and Adorno influence their ideas? Could the *content* of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, or the content of any of Fromm's well known books, be explained, albeit in part, by the dynamics of their relationships within the four walls of the Institute? Are there relational reasons behind the acrimoniousness of the Marcuse-Fromm debate? As

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[1] I must confess that much of what I know about the history of the Institute I learned from McLaughlin's essays [McLaughlin 1998a; McLaughlin 1998b; McLaughlin 1999; McLaughlin 2001; McLaughlin 2008], so these should be taken as "uninformed suggestions."

McLauglhin [2008] himself acknoledges, in his powerful "How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual" [McLaughlin 1998a] and in some other essays about the Institute, he had explained Erich Fromm's difficulties by pointing to his "escape from orthodoxy" in both the Marxist and the Freudian fields:

> I emphasized how Fromm's intellectual challenge to both Marxist and Freudian orthodoxies, and his relative independence from the influence of Horkheimer (...) was a challenge to the vision that Horkheimer held for the emerging Frankfurt School (...) 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 [McLaughlin 2008].

In other words Fromm's recognition within the Institute, as well as the measure of his social and symbolic capital (dependent variables), were explained by the relative orthodoxy of his ideas (independent variables). It seems that here, as elsewhere, the relationships between "ideas" and "society," that is micro and macro social relatioships and dynamics, has been "reversed," at least in comparison to the sociology of knowledge tradition.

My latter obervations are not a caveat for a more "materialistic" sociology of ideas. Far from it – after all, as Robert Bellah (the subject of my current research) wrote some thirty years ago interpreting the work of Émile Durkheim, society and social relations are themselves symbolic "things" [Bellah 1973; see also Alexander 2004; Alexander and Smith 2002]. My observations want to be just a reminder of an hypothetical "causal direction" (from social relations to ideas) that has to be mantained if the identity of the sociology of knowledge, and its very *raison d'être*, are to be maintained.

A number of examples will serve to illustrate the general point. Charles Camic's essay on the young Talcott Parsons describes the local environment of Harvard University in the late Twenties and early Thirties advanced an explanation of Parsons' selection of Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber as the "predecessors" of modern (i.e. Parsons' own) sociology [Camic 1992]. In this case, ideas (the choice of the four authors and the voluntaristic model of action) are explained (in part) by social relations (Parsons' Harvard *milieu*) [See also Camic 2006 on Parsons' concept of culture]. In Neil Gross' *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* [Gross 2008], it is Rorty's alleged shift from analytic philosophy to pragmatism the variable to be explained, and Gross focuses his attention on both Rorty's familial culture and the wider academic environment (Chicago, Princeton, Virginia) in which he was working. Last but not least, Farrell's own *Collaborative Circles* is full of explanations of this kind: The emergence of Impressionism, the Fugitives own brand of poetry, some of Freud's ideas on sexuality, to name a few,

are all explained with reference to particular social relationships and organizational and emotional dynamics.

To conclude, it is my conviction that the sociology of ideas should keep as its focal point the explanation of ideas in terms of their social determinants. This, to be sure, should be an hypothesis that has to be demonstrated case by case, but is nonetheless a "regulatory" hypothesis. From a methodological point of view, I think that a deeper immersion of the researcher into the ideas and the works of the intellectual(s) she is studying – that is, a more content-oriented analysis – would help develop our understanding of the relationships between "ideas" and "society." In an unpublished essay on Robert Bellah and the civil religion debate [Bortolini 2008], I have tried to understand how the debate generated by his famous essay, *Civil Religion in America*, pushed Bellah to change his ideas on civil religion, and how the failure to accept this change on the part of his critics led him to abandon the term altogether. It is, to be sure, a delicate and even risky path, for intepretation is not an easy task even if, as McLaughlin [2008] correcty puts it, "sociologists of ideas should be relatively agnostic about the value of the ideas they study and should choose cases on theoretical and methodological grounds." But to say that Fromm's ideas were unorthodox – or that Parsons could have selected authors other than Marshall or Pareto to prove his convergence thesis – already entails an unavoidable act of interpretation.

This said, I do not want to overstate my points as if they were elaborated *against* Neil McLaughlin and his fine essay. Mine is just a plea for a more mature sociology of ideas in which the hypothetical causal direction "from social relations to ideas" is maintained, sought for and, in the end, demonstrated, or even disproved, on a case by case basis. Neil McLaughlin is undoubtely going to give this kind of sociology an dedicated and stimulating contribution.

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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.

Matteo Bortolini is an assistant professor of Sociology at the University of Padua, Italy. He is a member of the editorial board of "Sociologica," and has been a visiting fellow at Boston University, Yale, and the Universitiy of California, Berkeley. His current research focuses on the sociology of intellectuals using the careers of some of Talcott Parsons' students as a case study for the problem of "finding one own's voice" in the social sciences.