

Neil Gross

## Comment on Neil McLaughlin/3

(doi: 10.2383/27717)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, settembre-ottobre 2008

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.  
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

### **Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Comment on Neil McLaughlin/3

*by* Neil Gross

doi: 10.2383/27717

Many years ago when I was in graduate school I approached my dissertation advisor, Charles Camic, and asked him to recommend some recent readings on the sociology of the social sciences and humanities. He had some excellent suggestions, including Robert Wuthnow's *Communities of Discourse* and Joseph Bryant's *Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece* – and he also mentioned something about a little book by Randall Collins that was scheduled to appear soon... One of the article-length studies he commended to me was Neil McLaughlin's piece, "How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual: Intellectual Movements and the Rise and Fall of Erich Fromm." I appreciated the article for two reasons: first, because the case was bound up with the fate of psychoanalytic social theory, a topic on which I was originally planning to write my dissertation; and second because it nicely interwove an original take on the history of the Frankfurt School with sociological analysis, engaging with Michèle Lamont's important article, "How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher: The Case of Jacques Derrida." McLaughlin was one of only a handful of sociologists at the time doing such work, and I found his piece inspirational. It is therefore a great honor to find him a decade later saying nice things about my own work, and to discover that he has come to think of his investigations into the Frankfurt School as a contribution to the intellectual project Camic and I subsequently identified as "the new sociology of ideas" – a rethinking that, it seems, has pushed him in some new directions. In my comment on McLaughlin's "collaborative circles" essay, I simply want to say why I think it's an important one for the field.

There are two things about the essay that any sociologist of ideas is bound to appreciate. First, by having the courage to critically reevaluate his earlier contributions and reframe what he is up to, McLaughlin has done the area the great service of exemplifying what is entailed in the shift from older approaches to the sociology of intellectuals and knowledge to the newer approach Camic and I tried to discern in the writings of Collins, Pierre Bourdieu, Andrew Abbott, Steven Shapin, and others. Although these and other scholars vary considerably in terms of their epistemology, theoretical approach, and empirical focus, all share an interest in identifying the often hidden social mechanisms and processes operative at various levels of analysis – and across them – that shape academic careers, the knowledge production process, and ultimately the content of knowledge itself. Such an aspiration is not fundamentally inconsistent with aspects of the sociology of knowledge as envisioned by Karl Mannheim. But as Camic has noted the sociology of knowledge was, for intellectual, institutional, and political reasons, stunted in its development over the course of the Twentieth century. While the sociology of culture, which also traces its roots through Mannheim, experienced at the end of that century a great flowering, the sociology of intellectual production – particularly as concerns the humanities and social sciences – was rarely able to rise above ideology critique on the one side and vague and woolly sociologically-inflected intellectual history on the other. Only in the late 1980s and 1990s did the tide begin to turn, though too often still scholars who in their own way took seriously Robert K. Merton’s earlier call to bring together a highly theoretical “European” approach to the subject with a rigorous “American” empiricism failed to orient their work toward one another – a problem that Camic and I aimed to correct. McLaughlin’s “collaborative circles” essay – when read against his earlier pieces on the Frankfurt School, the one Camic suggested to me as well as “Origin Myths in Social Science” and “Why Do Schools of Thought Fail” – exemplifies the shift toward the new way of thinking in two respects. It treats ideas and intellectual careers first and foremost as data for theoretical advancement and refinement, moving away from what McLaughlin describes as the more “partisan” orientation of his earlier essays, which had as a major goal to correct the intellectual-historical record. At the same time, the essay is deeply engaged with a wide variety of theoretical approaches, and, despite the focus on Farrell, studiously resists the impulse, too often evident in the “old” sociology of knowledge, to bring in a single sociological theory as a *deus ex machina* to account for anything and everything about the intellectual-historical situation the analyst wishes to explain. I don’t want to overstate this point. In fact, I think there’s less distance between McLaughlin’s earlier essays and this one than he seems to think there is – and I mean that in a good way. Neither of those pieces was *really* partisan. Yes, they aimed to make a case that Fromm was more important to

the Frankfurt School than most intellectual historians had acknowledged, and that the process by which he was eventually shunted to the margins of the group had more to do with the dynamics of intellectual orthodoxy than with any intrinsic deficiency in his thought. But both articles were far less polemical than most historical accounts of the Institute of Social Research, and were explicitly framed as case studies in the sociology of knowledge. Nevertheless, in putting reconstructive intellectual-historical ambitions aside and entertaining a wider variety of theoretical hypotheses than were considered earlier, the paper makes clear not just what is entailed in the shift to the new sociology of ideas, but as well what explanatory gains can be leveraged in the process. Another way of saying this is to say that despite their many merits there were tinges of ideology critique (of a sort) left in the earlier essays, and these have now been expunged to good effect.

Second, it seems to me that McLaughlin's theoretical instincts push in good directions. Farrell's book on collaborative circles is a wonderful attempt to tease general theoretical insights out of empirically-rich case studies of artistic and literary production as well as other forms of creativity. By bringing Farrell's phasic model into dialogue with the new sociology of ideas, examining its fit with the Frankfurt School case, and using aspects of the model to explain Fromm's ouster – in particular, the emphasis during the so-called “quest phase” of a creative circle's lifecycle on articulating a coherent group identity by means of boundary work that positions some group members as inside the circle and relegates others to the outside – McLaughlin makes two important moves. He connects up the sociology of ideas and intellectuals with a more general sociology of creativity while also urging us to think seriously about integrating phasic analysis – whether Farrell's or some other – into our theoretical toolkit. To be sure, neither move is unprecedented. For its part, Collins's model of philosophical productivity, by virtue of the scope of its empirical ambition, is intended to apply to academic philosophers and philosophically-inclined literary figures alike. At the same time, as Collins pointed out in his *Social Forces* review of Farrell, one of the foundational works in the sociology of ideas – Nicholas Mullins's *Theories and Theory Groups in Contemporary American Sociology* – also employed a phasic approach. But there is something different about what McLaughlin is trying to do. On the one side, his approach to both the Frankfurt School materials and to the comparisons he sets up with the collaborative circles analyzed by Farrell is largely inductive in orientation. It aims to identify from a theoretically-informed examination of a variety of cases some common patterns, tendencies, and regularities, as well as dimensions of variation in the objects of analysis. This is as it should be, and by encouraging sociologists of ideas to look beyond the confines of intellectual production at other forms of creativity McLaughlin encourages us to have a wider

empirical purview that could ultimately help us clarify what is sociologically common to all instances of creative expression and what is unique about intellectual productivity per se. By contrast, Collins's efforts to span the intellectual-literary-artistic divide – perhaps because of his epistemological commitment to positivist social science – often border on a Hempelian deductivism in which cases are lined up not so that their secrets, commonalities, and differences can be extracted, but as evidence of the uniform correctness of some theoretical proposition formulated *a priori*. On the other side, despite the predilections of some contributors to the new sociology of ideas for models sensitive to the inherent sequentiality of social life – I am thinking of Abbott – phasic models per se are no longer at the center of the field's attention, though they hold great promise for uniting probabilistic causal analysis with attention to contingency, group dynamics, emotionality, and interaction (a terrific and fresh example of the deployment of phasic models in the sociology of culture is Jennifer Lena and Richard Peterson's piece on "Types and Trajectories of Music Genres" in the October 2008 issue of *American Sociological Review*). Scott Frickel and I tried to incorporate certain aspects of a phasic model into our account of "scientific/intellectual movements," which McLaughlin also discusses, but much more could be done in this regard, and another strength of McLaughlin's piece is to remind us how fruitful this could be.

More generally, a look at the intellectual-historical record would reveal 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 careers and for the institutional and intellectual trajectories of the groups in question. McLaughlin's use of Farrell will help us make better sense of the experiences of such figures, while the empirically-derived criticisms he raises of Farrell in the last sections may lead to theoretical clarification of the collaborative circles idea itself.

## Comment on Neil McLaughlin/3

---

**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:* sociology of ideas, creative circles, Erich Fromm, Frankfurt School, Institute of Social Research.

---

**Neil Gross** is associate professor of sociology at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of *Richard Rorty: The Making of An American Philosopher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) and writes frequently on the sociology of ideas and sociological theory.