How do you understand theoretical productions? Modern scholarship is a very peculiar thing, emerging from the enormous expansion of secondary education and the accompanying proliferation of professional intellectuals. Each has to produce a unique contribution, yielding the fragmentation of specialities and the search for scholarly significance on the grounds that something or someone has, hitherto, been relatively neglected. When you look at the present, there is a bewildering complexity and diversity of competing or co-existing schools, ideas, scholars, think-tanks, and individualists. The past only appears to be less fragmented because we know what came after, which ideas amounted to something or were made to succeed and which shrivelled on the vine or were deliberately side-tracked, marginalized, and consigned to various dust bins. Great service has been performed by scholars who have dug up the cadavers of whole bodies of thought and practices that had been buried. Having once been made irrelevant, they have new relevance thrust upon them.

Late twentieth century theorists re-discovered that what serves as knowledge has been socially constructed. The question that was asked of it wasn’t the post-war concern with “Knowledge for What?”, but the even older question of whether knowledge was possible at all. Knowledge claims were either arbitrary or were merely reflective of the claimants. With no external, objective point of reference, there were only a variety of interpretations that had singled out certain ideas, or people, or movements and made them central. Social science claims rested on no stronger a firmament than theology. If you couldn’t write credibly any more about, for example, “What Marx Really Meant”, the title of one exercise in skewed interpretation, the alternative seemed to be to stick entirely to the product of thought. In the beginning was the word, the unadorned, non-contextualized text, “Reading Capital” for example.

We can no longer pretend to know what an author really meant but, as in the long-term analysis of Fromm and critical theory, and Polyani and Christian Socialism, scholarly understanding means contextual interpretation. What we have heard are moments in the life of a continuous process of scholarly research. Scholarship mushrooms because everything inter-relates. The biography of an individual is simultaneously the social history of times and places, and the biographies of their intimate circles. Where to impose boundaries is a perennial problem, as Berkeley has said. Neil has interpreted Fromm’s exclusion from critical theory as a consequence of material and ideological factors, and seeks a means to structure Fromm’s history inside and outside the Frankfurt School.

We know, if only from these two examples, that no social theorist is a Robinson Crusoe in the erection of her or his explanations. Berkeley has drawn upon Polyani’s Christian socialist collaborators to understand the ethical conclusions of his The Great Transformation. Fromm was drawn into the Frankfurt School in his early 30s, joining a more formal and structured collaborative alliance.
A biography is essentially the story of an individual’s life course. The life course is a way to understand the common stages through which a life progresses – a kind of developmental psychology for the transition from young adult to old age. The individualistic focus of life course analysis may be supplemented by an understanding of cohorts – the experiences of commonly situated people within a shared context. But not everyone responds the same to the milestones of the life course or to the externally imposed vicissitudes of life’s travails. It is extremely difficult to impose a model on individual biographies of social theorists beyond what is commonplace and banal. Creative people are socialized into the standards of their time. In an era that demands novelty, individuality, and difference, usually but not always as young adults, they rebel against external authority, even their erstwhile mentors, seek the company of like-minded others, and produce innovative works, or ideas, or movements.

Intellectuals stand in a variety of relationships to like-minded others. The apprenticeship model assumes unequally qualified members, hierarchical status, and the perpetuation of existing theories and practices. In the universities, the natural sciences, which tend to follow this model, appear adept at providing a system of mentoring through which scientific questions are examined in a cumulative and successive process. This is the academy approach in art.

Individuals may be made marginal or separate themselves from the traditions of their discipline and burst its bounds. In the process, they may associate with like-minded others. You might have the jazz scene in New Orleans, perhaps the Young Hegelians, or the second generation of romantic English poets. Perhaps even the early Bolsheviks. While everyone is equal, perhaps there is one who is more than equal than the others. In other cases, it may be doubted that the putative members of a defined group were actually like-minded or consciously associated, such as the Austro-Marxists. Was Spencer just one of the Utilitarians, or sufficiently eccentric to be autonomous?

The development of like-minded circles of disaffected young intellectuals, such as the Impressionists, Farrell has argued, follows a life-course of its own. In part this amounts to applying concepts from small group analysis, such as inside/outside, core/periphery, boundary maintenance, rule promulgation and role playing.

Even in a collaborative circle of equals, some may have dominating personalities. Interesting cases involve genuinely autonomous and talented individuals drawn together (as in the Impressionist model) where dominating personalities co-exist. There may be a significant difference between those that coalesce spontaneously and those circles that are consciously organized. They may have resources that attract others; they may actively recruit – membership might be by invitation (leading to a distinction between original members and late-comers). An organized, hierarchical centre may be different from a spontaneous, egalitarian one. Horkheimer may have been only a few years older than other core Frankfurt School members, but age gradations may appear more significant among younger people. More importantly, as Director, the position was conceived as having authority and control. Neil has mentioned the importance of
contextualizing the centre (as you would an individual) and of the material aspects of this context.

An individual may belong to more than one centre. Is a circle less appropriate conceptually than a Venn diagram, with somewhat overlapping, yet also somewhat distinct memberships? Perhaps this image fits Polanyi better, though there was some consistency of personnel over time (first in Vienna, then in England). Perhaps it is more useful when an individual is modifying her or his original conceptions, away from an earlier circle, towards the perspectives of a newer one. As Fromm revised his original materialist interpretation of Freud, he interacted with other revisionists – the other circle Neil mentioned. In addition, you can be influenced by people or ideas that are part of no circle to which you have access.

I wonder, for example, about Fromm’s spouse, assuming there was a spouse, about whom I know nothing. A spouse can be an intellectual collaborator or play a traditional role as indispensable servant upon whose services books may be written. In the first instance, a crucially important dynamic is established. What little I know of Polanyi’s private life also leads me to wonder about the quality of the intellectual relationship. Polanyi, for example, asserted unequivocally that he was not to be called a communist of any description, not a Christian Communist, and had no sympathy for the doctrine (though in some contexts, he appears sympathetic to “socialism” in Russia). Polanyi had fled from Budapest and the radical Budapest Soviet of Bella Kun before this experiment had been defeated, largely by outside intervention. His wife Ilona Duczynska, wrote about the workers and soldiers councils that formed in the days of Red Vienna (you wonder who had the natural sympathy for the proletariat), and when her husband left Austria for England in 1933, when fascism began to descend, his wife stayed behind, became active in the underground movement, and joined the Communist Party. What is the significance of Red Vienna: that peaceful, democratic, and reformist socialism is possible, or that it is temporarily possible in the right circumstances but is vulnerable to destruction by right-wing violence? The question of reformism versus communism must have led to some interesting tea-time conversations. Duczynska appears at least as interesting as Karl, and influential in his developing world view.

This may be the case with both Fromm and Polanyi and existentialism. Fromm’s “escape from freedom” as well as Polanyi’s ethical concern with the burden of conscience, that we are responsible even indirectly for what is done in our society, is reminiscent of the concept “bad faith” that existentialists were developing – the tendency to blame forces over which you have no control for actions that were yours. Existentialism is mentioned briefly but you wonder whether there wasn’t a more profound influence, if not circle membership, than a coincidence of ideas.

Both Fromm and Polanyi focus on the subjective side of the social equation, in the context of the failures of historical materialism, particularly as it had been interpreted through the 1920s. Hence, Polanyi’s interest in the “early” Marx, and Fromm’s concern with the way psychology could be said to be determinate of social
structures. The social scientific problem was that there appeared to be a discrepancy between objective position and class consciousness.

Both Fromm and Polanyi experienced fascism and their theories necessarily had to account for this phenomenon. For Fromm, if you dig beneath the surface of progressive opinion among workers, you would uncover deeper latent opinions and personality traits that were authoritarian rather than revolutionary. Polanyi believed that, at their foundation, socialism and Christianity were the same and they were both the expression of a social type of individual; therefore, the Nazis had to attack both doctrines. The issue of how the Catholic Church officially made its peace with fascism is less important since, for Polanyi, Christianity was not the same as the institutional church.

The upshot of my discussion, then, is that the approach of contextualizing social thought in terms of time and space, of associating ideas with circles of influence, and linking the personal and the political are key elements of understanding social theory in its convoluted development. In such a monumental exercise, we are always left with unanswered questions and further studies.