Interviews – *peer-reviewed*
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/18547

Sociologica. V.17 N.3 (2023)
ISSN 1971-8853

Intellectuals, Pragmatism, and the Craft of Sociology: Matteo Bortolini in Conversation with Neil Gross

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Submitted: November 30, 2023 – Accepted: December 20, 2023 – Published: March 12, 2024

Abstract

In this interview with Matteo Bortolini, Neil Gross talks about pragmatism in sociology, the sociology of intellectuals, and his work on the police. The interview also addresses some points of a sociologist's professional life and its different stages, starting from the hypothesis that sociologists of ideas and intellectuals should be particularly exposed to continuous moments of reflexivity.

Keywords: Neil Gross; Sociology of intellectuals; Sociology of ideas; Pragmatism; Police.

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Matteo Bortolini: Let's start by summarizing your career. Where did you study sociology? When did your main interest in the things that you've done first emerge?

Neil Gross: So, I didn't study sociology as an undergraduate. I studied Legal Studies at UC Berkeley; the program there has a long and interesting history connected to the police. At the beginning of the 20th century in Berkeley, there was this very reform-minded police chief in office, August Vollmer. One of the things he tried to do was get the police and the university to have a closer relationship. He started a police science program on campus which eventually morphed into a criminology program. That existed for a long time. Then in the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a great deal of political contestation and the criminology program was shut down. It eventually came back but as a very different kind of program, focused on law and society more generally. Johan Koehler wrote an article about this that drew on the SIMs framework, the scientific-intellectual movements approach (Frickel & Gross, 2005; Koehler, 2015). So I went through the undergraduate version of that in the 1990s. Along the way I took a couple of sociology classes. There was one class that was quite theoretical, that I loved. It was not taught by a professor, but by a terrific lecturer, Brian Powers, who was very psychoanalytically oriented. I really enjoyed that class. But I had no intention of becoming a sociologist or an academic of any kind. My plan all through college was to become a police officer. So after graduating from Berkeley I went to the police academy. I worked on the streets of Berkeley for just under a year before realizing that it was not the right career for me and left.

MB: Why did you leave the police?

NG: For a couple of reasons. First, I was too young. I graduated college when I was twenty-one. I had gone to several different colleges, actually. I went to UC San Diego for my first year, then attended community college for a semester, and then ended up at Berkeley. By the time I finished the police academy and was sworn in, I was twenty-two. I was a pretty mature 22 year old, but even so I realized I wasn't prepared for the gravity of the job and I didn't have some of the life skills it required. The other thing was that I felt like I was too impressionable. I went in with the idea of fighting crime and making the criminal justice system better. But I found that there were cops on the street who had a very different approach, even in a reform-minded progressive department. And to a certain extent I found myself falling under their sway. Also, it was lonely! I didn't live in Berkeley, and I worked at night, so it was hard to meet people. I wanted a different kind of experience. And I thought that maybe graduate school was it. It wasn't like, "I must study sociology," but I wanted to try something different. So I thought about different programs I might apply to and I remembered that I enjoyed that one sociology course. But I came to the decision to apply to graduate school quite late, and I had missed the application deadlines for every program. Except, there was one program in sociology that was well known for having connections to law and policing studies and that, unlike every other program, accepted applicants to start in January. I am talking about Wisconsin. I had no idea that Wisconsin was one of the top-ranked programs at the time. I arrived in Madison in the middle of winter and took some classes about the police, but then I took a class with Charles Camic and my interest totally turned and that's when I got interested in theory.

MB: So you had a kind of insight or maybe even a conversion…

NG: I was still pretty ambivalent during the first few semesters of graduate school. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out whether to quit and go back to policing. And at one point I actually got the Berkeley police department to offer me my job back and I was going to leave.

But I found the work that Camic was doing on the sociology of intellectuals and ideas very compelling. Enough so that I decided to stick around.

MB: I don't know much about Wisconsin, but Chad Alan Goldberg is a good friend and told me about the "Wisconsin Idea," its politics and inspiration (Goldberg, 2020). I guess it was quite different from Berkeley, maybe another kind of university or other kind of spirit. Did this have any impact on you? Because I see that it has a big impact on him.

NG: I didn't have any meaningful contact with the Berkeley graduate students, except for one semester I spent back there after I'd finished most of my coursework at Wisconsin, when I took a class that Bob Bellah cotaught with LoÏc Wacquant on Durkheim and Mauss. So I can't really speak to differences between that department and Wisconsin. As for the Wisconsin Idea, I found the graduate students at Madison not competitive but instead cooperative and collegial. And the fights among the faculty were largely hidden from our view. It was a very welcoming environment. There was also a different admissions model. The philosophy was, let in more people, let's be a little bit less selective, and give people the opportunity to succeed. And then, if they make it through, they make it through. And that was a great model. I seriously doubt I would have been admitted without that model. Beyond that, Wisconsin was and still is a very quantitative department. But at the same time it was quite pluralistic, and I never had a sense, as someone doing theory, that my work was any less respected by professors and peers, even though they might have been doing demography or whatever.

MB: I'd like to hear what you think about something I've been thinking about for some time. How do we come to know about other scholars? Most of the times, I would say, it is either because somebody introduces us to them, or because we are interested in a topic and then we find some paper by one particular scholar, and then we come into contact personally through email or another medium, as the two of us did some fifteen years ago. And so maybe there is a kind of bias: we think that *that* person has *that* interest, i.e., the one that first interested *me*. And then we discover that the same intellectual or scholar has always had other interests, some of which are very different from the one that first pushed us to contact them. That happened to me when I discovered that you were also studying the politics and religion of professors (Gross, 2013) in addition to what had interested me in the first place, the Rorty thing (Gross, 2008). So my question would be: how and when did you start to develop these different interests for different topics? Maybe they were there since the very beginning, and simply I did not know about them. For example, in my own experience, I did my BA thesis on an Italian political scandal, *Tangentopoli*. But it wasn't until like fifteen years later that I published anything about it... To an external observer it seems to pop out of the blue, but it was a very early interest of mine. What do you think?

NG: I've had a very similar set of experiences. My undergraduate thesis at Berkeley was on the history of the efforts to suppress free speech in the United States, especially in the period immediately following World War I, and I'm only now coming back and starting to do some work on free speech. But to speak more broadly, I've always thought of myself as a generalist. Part of that is that I get bored fairly easily, and after I've worked intensely on topic for a while I find that I want to learn about a completely new area, and the best way to do that is to start a project. I wish I could say I had a clearly laid out path for why I choose new topics at particular points, but usually it's that some opportunity arises or I have some insight I want to explore or there's something happening in the wider culture that I want to respond to. On the politics of American professors, for example, I only started that research because somebody at Harvard got a grant to study professors and politics and asked me if I wanted to be part of it, and I was like, "Okay, that sounds interesting, and I think maybe I can make a contribution there." And that ended up taking, you know, almost ten years of my life.

MB: So how do you manage the symbolic capital that comes with the different topics? I mean, would you take a speaking engagement on professors and politics *now*? Or on Richard Rorty *now*? Or would you turn it down? Why would you do that?

NG: That's the challenge of the generalist, right? Because every time you enter a new area, you come as a neophyte, with no capital to speak of in that area. And you're right, there are some fields where, after you've finished your engagement, you quickly lose the ability to say anything meaningful because of how rapidly the scholarship on that topic evolves. So I wouldn't speak about Rorty now because I haven't actively followed the new literature and I would be hopelessly out of date with whatever I said. As for professors and politics I would accept an invitation to speak. I've done a better job keeping up with the literature there.

MB: You know, that's what happened to me. I am now turning down everything that has to do with Robert Bellah, if anybody asks me to write on Bellah I say: "Ok, I've written this book but now I'm okay, I've done my job and that's it."

NG: That's hard in your case now because you are unequivocally *the* expert on Bellah's work now, so it's harder to turn down, you know? I mean, that's not all you are, but among the many things that you are now, so…

MB: So if now we go back to your graduate school years, I think you would name Chas Camic as your first mentor, but would you also think of others? A couple of days ago I was discussing with David Stark and others the fact that at some point you turn fifty and you recognize in yourself some of the ways and the habits typical of your teacher(s). If this is true, who would you pick as the scholars who influenced you the most? Not in, you know, a clear way, but also in a more practical, tacit knowledge kind of way.

NG: Camic was very much a hands on mentor for me. He showed me how to do research and compose articles, and for years he read and gave comments on pretty much everything I wrote. He's no less inspirational to me today. Another person who influenced me at Wisconsin — who influenced a lot of the grad students — was Jerry Marwell, a social movements scholar but also a generalist. He taught the first class I ever took, which was a seminar on James Coleman's (1990) *Foundations of Social Theory*. Jerry was a pugnacious thinker but also quite sweet and I found that to be a winning combination. Mitch Duneier served on my dissertation committee and taught me a lot about how to come at problems from interesting angles. Other influences: my father was a big figure in my intellectual life. He was very wide-ranging reader and an editor. Also, as my work has evolved in recent years to include more writing for non-academic audiences, both my wife and then editors that I've worked with, at publishing houses and newspapers, have done a lot to shape my writing style. They've made me a better writer.

MB: I was asking this because one of the positive things that I find in being a sociologist of ideas is that you are forced, every minute, I would say, to think that what you are writing about others somehow applies to you. Maybe if you are working on factories or religion it is not exactly the same. So I think that it's a bit of a trick. I mean, for example, when you wrote the Rorty book, were you thinking about yourself and mirroring in what you were writing? That seems to me one of the curses of this particular job.

NG: I think you're right. To answer your question, I was thinking about intellectual self-concept when I was at Harvard writing that book. I really loved the Harvard department, but I was a junior faculty member at a time when tenure was very, very hard to get at that institution, and I remember lunchtime conversations with certain senior faculty members where I tried to explain what I was doing with the Rorty project, and they just did *not* get it, did not understand why or how it was sociology. At some point in all that I started asking myself who I was as a sociologist and as an intellectual. I was also immersed in Rorty's life, of course, and reading about identity and narrative. I don't think I developed the theory because of my own biographical experiences, but there was probably some sort of interaction. How did that play out for you for you?

MB: So, in my case, one of the central points of my book (Bortolini, 2021) is that Robert Bellah was since the very beginning an object of great admiration by both his peers and even some teachers, maybe too much. So he had this kind of inflated expectations about himself, and then depression because he was never up to those expectations. The typical custom here in Italy, on the contrary, is that teachers would rarely say anything good to you — at least in the 1990s, no teacher would be encouraging. Where I got my PhD, professors would rather attack you for nothing during a meeting. I remember attending seminars where graduate students would say three words — I mean three words — and then full professors would attack them ruthlessly. It was not discussion, it was completely unfair. Okay, so I was like mirroring myself in the story that I was writing and I said to myself, I have never had anything like what Bellah had, that kind of support. And I understood that one of the things that I've done since the late 1990s, before even getting my PhD, was looking for *real* teachers, because I had not had one. And I was very lucky because at some point I met with this sociologist who was, and still is, at Boston University, Adam B. Seligman, who taught me a lot. And then I got to know Margaret Archer and then Marco Santoro and then Robert Bellah, so in the end it was good. But it was like the "normal" sequence was reversed: I first became a scholar and then I looked for teachers, because I knew I could not learn everything by myself. Three months into the graduate program, my advisor at the University of Bologna told me he was not really interested in my dissertation, so I had to do it by myself, and could not stop thinking that what I was doing was probably all wrong — those kinds of thoughts.

NG: My own version of that is that at Wisconsin everyone was very supportive — almost to a fault. Like I said, I didn't have a sociology background when I started at Wisconsin and the things that interested me were pretty idiosyncratic. The program there was incredibly rigorous and I learned a ton, but faculty members allowed me to be my idiosyncratic self, and the result, I think, was that there were big parts of sociology that I never learned much about. I spent the decade after that, when I was an assistant professor, really learning what sociology is. Maybe I should have had my feet held to the fire a little bit more! Or made sure to hold my own feet to the fire.

MB: This last topic is very interesting because some of my colleagues think that students today, both undergraduates and graduate, start to specialize too early and never learn the basics. But this is tricky, for I've been teaching classic theory for years and then at some point I stopped because I wanted these kids to learn more about the theories of the last thirty years. I thought, how can you know "everything" about Durkheim, but you have never heard of Bourdieu or Richard Peterson? Can you do that? But then, at the same time, the trick is that if you teach Bourdieu without teaching Weber and Durkheim first, their grasp of Bourdieu might be very thin. It looks like those situations where there is a big mistake in every decision.

NG: Exactly. Yes. Wisconsin had very well thought out preliminary examinations where you had to learn different fields, and I got a great grounding in the ones I chose, basically comparative-historical sociology and theory. The department really couldn't have required more than that, so of course I'm being unfair to blame them for my limited knowledge upon graduation. But do I wish I'd gone more deeply into political sociology, stratification, family sociology, demography, and so on? It's such a big fascinating field!

MB: So like that maybe you have been doing this job for twenty-five years, you read a lot, and you do not remember that you did not read everything during those three years as an undergraduate. But now it is time to tackle some specific topic. Tell me, how and when did you get interested in pragmatism: before Rorty, during Rorty, or after Rorty? One thing that I found puzzling while I was re-reading your theoretical stuff is that I found the classical pragmatists like Mead, Peirce, and Dewey, but not Rorty, who is a kind of maverick pragmatist. What do you think?

NG: I got interested in it before Rorty. My first publication was a contextual account of Durkheim's 1913–1914 lectures on pragmatism and sociology, looking at why he gave those lectures and what he was trying to do with them, in the Quentin Skinner illocutionary sense (Gross, 1997). I was kind of surrounded by pragmatism in grad school. I'd taken a class on pragmatism in the Philosophy Department at Wisconsin. Hans Joas had come through Madison as a visiting professor, and I took some courses with him. He was incredibly impressive. And, you know, Camic himself was much influenced by pragmatism. Even before I went to graduate school, my father gave me some Peirce to read and some William James, and I think I had that in my head when I started. I certainly had read some Rorty, but I was always more interested in the action-theoretical side of pragmatism than the epistemological side. So for me, later on, Rorty was purely a case study, interesting because of his remarkable career, not because I was so personally moved by his ideas.

MB: When I read some of the new pragmatist stuff, my immediate impression was like that it was the right way to read Bourdieu, an author that I know well. Pragmatism does so much better than him on habits and practice, and so I said, "Oh, so this is the clever way to say the same thing!". Now, how would you describe the field of American sociology from your point of view, and how would your attempt to create a new pragmatist sociology (Gross et al., 2021) would map into the field?

NG: That is a huge question and not one I'll do very well answering on the spot! Although there aren't as many self-identified theorists anymore, my sense is that many empirical sociologists now, across subfields and approaches, also think of themselves as users and even creators or elaborators of theory, whether in the Mertonian middle range sense or some other. At the same time, more sociologists seem to be acknowledging that their research is animated by social reconstructive interests. We argue in the pragmatism book that pragmatism is especially well suited to helping theoretically-minded empiricists with normative, reconstructive interests think through their problems, across levels of analysis. It also provides a flexible and psychologically plausible action-theoretical model that pairs well with other approaches.

MB: You always say "I'm starting a new project, I'm starting a new project." What I am going to say comes maybe from my experience, and maybe it is not true in general, but let's pretend it's true… Most of the time, new projects come from contact with smart and ambitious graduate students. Since you teach in a liberal arts college, how is it to teach only undergraduates, from that point of view? Where do you find the people to collaborate with?

NG: That's a great question. I do have a ton of super talented undergraduates for sure. But, recently, to do more complicated projects, I have had to try to recruit graduate students from other universities. So, I am just reaching out through people I know and seeing who might be interested. The projects I'm working on now do not come from graduate students, but I often involve graduate students in the research because sometimes I just do not have the technical skills to do what the project requires.

MB: I get it — you know here in Italy the system works a bit differently with post-docs and research assistants. Let's move on, then. In your 2010 paper on Charles Tilly, you wrote that, if read properly, Tilly is an exemplar of pragmatist sociology (Gross, 2010). Do you still think this after thirteen years, or did you find a better exemplar? I think a lot about exemplars, for they are really crucial to *show* students and would-be scholars a piece of work that might be inspiring for them. I think that showing by example is crucial for their training. A couple of weeks ago, we were in class comparing Geertz's (1973) *Balinese Cockfight* with Robert Darnton's (1984) *Great Cat Massacre* and also Carlo Ginzburg's (1976) *The Cheese and the Worms*, and I was trying to explain to students that the logic of research in the three pieces is completely different — even between Darnton and Geertz, who are sometimes thought as very, very close (Burke 2007; Levi, 1985). And so, I told them: "See, if you like this or if you like that, it is a very different way of doing research or thinking through problems." So, do you still think of Tilly as *the* exemplar or a good exemplar for pragmatism?

NG: I continue to think that Tilly is an exemplar of pragmatist sociology, if you squint really, really hard. I mean, he was not himself influenced by pragmatism and there is clearly no effort in his work to explicitly incorporate pragmatism into historical sociology. But I hope that if he were to read some of the contemporary work on pragmatism, he would find it to resonate with his general way of thinking. And so, in some sense, he is a pragmatist. The kind of sociology that we encourage in our volume is work that is empirically engaged. It is work that has a loose pragmatist sensibility, but is more concerned to answer a question well, with whatever resources that are at its disposal, than with complete fidelity to the tradition.

MB: You've been the editor of *Sociological Theory*. Do you think that this kind of service added something to you as a thinker or researcher? Was it only a duty or did you grow somehow in what you are doing *now*?

NG: I think everybody has different experience with editing journals. I found it exciting, but also completely exhausting. And when I was done with the journal and done with service to the ASA, I really found that I needed to take a break from academic sociology. I turned more toward public engagement for a while, partially because I was just so burnt out on the sociology side of things. But I did find journal editing to be very exciting and I learned so much, because as a journal editor you are constantly exposed to all sorts of great ideas. Of course, you're also exposed to a lot of ideas that are not necessarily going to go anywhere. So it was a mixed bag for me, I would say.

MB: When I was the editor of this journal, *Sociologica*, from 2013 to 2015, I learned two things. The first one is that I am not able to lead, something that I just accepted. The second is that I was constantly thinking about cross-dialog or interdisciplinary work. So, what was your experience working with people from different disciplines? Now that I moved to a department of history, I have organized a couple of seminars with historians and sociologists, and at some point I was introducing a historian and I said, "Obviously, we all like interdisciplinarity." A history professor in the first row raised his hand and said, "I don't! I only read history and only want to speak with historians." He was joking, but not really. So, taking for granted that everybody wants to do interdisciplinary work is not true. Tell me about your experiences with this.

NG: With the Rorty book in particular, I knew that it would be read by intellectual historians and also by philosophers, and I guessed that they would not like the book very much, because it was not the kind of book that is typical in those fields. One of my goals, though, was to write it in such a way that philosophers and intellectual historians wouldn't dismiss it out of hand because I'd gotten the philosophy and history wrong. I don't know that I fully succeeded in that, but I did hear from some philosophers and historians afterward that they did appreciate the book, even if they weren't necessarily on board with the sociology of ideas approach.

MB: I think that one of the most interesting things about interdisciplinarity is the difference between "intrapersonal" and "interpersonal" interdisciplinarity (Pfirman & Martin, 2010), with the interpersonal version simply meaning that you meet and work with an economist, anthropologist, and the like, while the intrapersonal version is that you read a lot of stuff outside the field yourself, which is a very different practice — and the outcome is also very different. So, from that point of view, what are your reading habits?

NG: Well, it's changed over the years. Now I don't really pay attention to those disciplinary distinctions. When I read, I just read for a topic, rather than by discipline. For example, I'm teaching a class about hate in the fall, covering everything from genocide to the rise of the far right in Europe and the US, and to prepare for that I've been reading anything and everything, whether it's a book by a historian, or a political scientist, or anthropologist, or an evolutionary psychologist, or a journalist.

MB: Do you think that this is also connected with the fact that when we are young, we are a bit more tightly connected with the discipline because we still have to make our way into it? At this point of our careers we are freer to do whatever we want.

NG: Absolutely. No question. The older I get the less I care about those disciplinary distinctions.

MB: It is like a sense that at some point you can almost do it without consequences, so to say, which is interesting, because when you are younger, and maybe a bit more energetic, you *have* to be disciplined.

NG: You have to be very focused. This was also Rorty's story. He was super disciplinarily focused when he started his career and remained so for a while after getting tenure. Only much later did he really begin to spread his wings beyond philosophy.

MB: And then maybe when you are older and you have kids, you are maybe more free but also more tired, so to say. I was thinking about this while reading a paper by Chas Camic (2023) about the fact that the context and the relationships around you are crucial to support that kind of energy — you are free because the institution helps you in being free. It is not just the intellectual detached from the institution, but also the institution supporting that form of detachment. I think that this is also true for keeping a good level in your work and what you are doing through the years. So, what if I asked you, what are the most meaningful relationships as time goes by? For example, for me it is important to move constantly and meeting new people, while other colleagues are just the opposite, as they like to have one or two main collaborators, stick with them and think with them.

NG: Yeah, I have thought about this in relation to Randall Collins' work. It strikes me as probably not coincidental that he writes so much about intellectual energy and seems to have so much intellectual energy or emotional energy himself (see for example Collins, 1998). I've always been jealous of people who I imagine are just a constant stream of writing all the time, every day. For me anyway, intellectual energy comes in in phases. It is a very big push for me to research and write a book. To speak to your point about meeting new people, I agree that that can be extremely energizing.

MB: So we might close the interview speaking briefly about your latest book, as an intimation of things to come.

NG: Happily. The book (Gross, 2023) is meant to showcase three US police departments that have managed to replace an aggressive police culture with something at least a little bit better. In the United States and globally, there has obviously been tremendous concern about the problems with policing and racialized police violence, and it is not always been clear that those problems were in any way solvable. The argument I make in the book is that we definitely need structural change to policing and to the criminal justice system more generally, but until we get there a good way to move forward is to put in place police chiefs and officers who can devise and scale up more humane versions of police culture. To understand this better, I got to know officers and chiefs in three cities in very different parts of the United States. I spent a lot of time with them, not conducting ethnographic research but doing fairly in-depth reporting, and the book tries to tell their stories. It's my first book written for a non-academic audience, so there's not much theory in it. But I like to think that pragmatism is in the bones. It's essentially a book about organizational creativity and problem solving in the criminal justice context.

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