

Fromm's ethic of solidarity and the potential for critical communitarianism

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It can be (and has been) claimed that one of the central thematic concerns in Erich Fromm's immense body of critical work is the exposition of a new "radical" humanist ethic, based upon the normative foundations of human solidarity/relatedness and love. The role of community in this ethic is vital, as Fromm argues for the existence of an intrinsically human need for belonging and communion. According to Fromm, the breakdown of traditional societies in modernity and the adoption of strong anti-traditionalist paradigms in both liberalism and Marxism has paradoxically led to the desire in the contemporary individual to "escape" this freedom, too often resulting in an uncritical adoption of what Eric Hobsbawm calls "invented traditions" in order to rediscover a shared sense of humankind. This article therefore contends that 1) Fromm advocates a form of "critical communitarianism"; and 2) that critical communitarianism can provide a strong foundation for an ethical confrontation with neoliberal modernity, and thereby a reconsidered form of community through human solidarity.

Fromm's psychosocial critique of modernity

In the face of the totalisation of modern life through technological/instrumental reason,¹ Erich Fromm and other critical thinkers hold that there is potential in a critical form of *communitarianist thought*² to counter the instrumentalisation and atomisation³ of human kind in modernity. As Fromm envisions it, the role of community is foundational for such a new humanist ethic due to a fundamental human need for belonging to something greater than the self (Fromm 1978, 93–95). Paradoxically, for both Fromm and Eric Hobsbawm, it is due to the interruption and sometimes total destruction of traditional societies in contemporary times, as well as the adoption of strong anti-traditionalist paradigms in both liberalism and Marxism, that there has been a corresponding increase in the desire in the modern individual to "escape" this lonely sense of individualism that modernity has cultivated. This has resulted too often in an unreflective adoption of what Hobsbawm (2000) calls "invented traditions" in order to satisfy the deep yearning for "belonging" in a sense of

1 Instrumental rationality refers to the critique of Enlightenment scientism and rationalism, made by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1944] 1997), in which they show, through a discussion on "reason" throughout the history of Western philosophy, how Western rationality developed into an "instrument of domination". As such, instrumental rationality can be considered a form of rationality which is in the service of an idea/ideal/institution which draws upon rational potentials of the human individual as a means to a particular end, as opposed to an end in itself.

2 The communitarianist thinker, Amitai Etzioni (2003, 224) defines communitarianism as a social philosophy; in other words, communitarianist thought highlights "the importance of society in articulating the good...in contrast to theories that emphasise the centrality of the individual". Communitarianism is also often contrasted with the tradition of liberalism, which essentially argues that individuals develop reason, subjectivity, and the notion of the good through their own selves alone. Communitarians, contrastingly, "examine the ways shared conceptions of the good are formed, transmitted, justified, and enforced" (ibid.). As such, the moral dialogues of communities which are transmitted and cultivated through various forms of social and communal participation are of interest to the communitarian theorists.

3 "Atomism", in this context, alludes to the individual as being (and becoming more) highly individualised, removed from social interaction and participation and becoming more so in modern life.

shared human community with particular goals, values and traditions. This article contends that a form of “critical communitarianism” – which it is argued is a position towards which Fromm leans, albeit not explicitly – has the potential to provide a strong foundation for an ethical confrontation with a fragmented and atomised modernity, as well as offering a constructive form of community through which human solidarity could be possible.⁴

In his 1941 book, *Escape From Freedom*, Fromm expressed a profound concern that the modern individual’s alienation from “soil and community in the transition from feudalism to capitalism increased insecurity and fear” (Kellner 1995). He then attempts to show how this fear of rootlessness and yearning for community has resulted in an investment in new forms of social power such as fascism and new consumer ideologies of market industrialism.⁵ Continuing the critical investigation of the roots of the immense loneliness of contemporary individuals, he not only developed a unique Freudian and Marxian approach to and application of social psychology in order to situate the individual within a greater social context,⁶ but also elaborated upon his positing of “love” as the normative goal of community. These concepts of “love” and “solidarity” are themes which are arguably present in and underlie all of Fromm’s critical work, and which contributed to the development not only of a critical theory, but also positive and emancipatory ideals of justice, a practical normative ethic, and a deep commitment to the recognition of community.

In relation to the aforementioned themes, this article will investigate Fromm’s particular critique of modernity and its disturbing consequences – such as the unprecedented experiences of loneliness and isolation as explicated above (which have only increased under neoliberal capitalism). The text will also aim to elaborate on how these effects have been established and fortified in contemporary society, specifically in the adoption of uncritical practices of traditionalism under the guise of “community”. This form of traditionalism, especially as it manifests as “invented traditions”, will be elaborated upon in a critical manner, attempting to show (following Hobsbawm) how certain current traditionalist movements do not challenge modernity, but are in fact elements of it. In the final discussion, a Frommian explanation of invented traditions will be discussed.

It is in his seminal text, *Escape From Freedom* (1994, viii), that Fromm makes the crucial observation that

4 It is important to point out the argument that the very concerns that Fromm finds problematic in post-war industrial capitalism have increased exponentially in the post-industrial capitalism of the second half of the twentieth century. This has largely been due to the rise of neoliberalism and digital neoliberalism, which theorists such as Anthony Giddens and Manuel Castells have identified as changing both the nature of capitalism as well as social life and communication (see Giddens 1991; Castells 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). This has inevitably led to new consumptive patterns, extraordinary new forms of identity creation, and an unprecedented rise in social and economic inequality. McManus (2018) argues that the neoliberalist culture has brought about unfathomable consequences relating to social fragmentation and alienation. Furthermore, technological advancements have brought about a hyper-real environment where neo-liberal subjects who feel alienated from these economic transformations increasingly inhabit restricted and highly partisan communication bubbles. The result of this is a growing distrust of alternative political viewpoints and the epistemic and moral foundations upon which they rest. This leads to an even greater sense of social fragmentation, amplified by concerns that internal enemies are responsible for the woes of alienated neo-liberal subjects (McManus 2018).

The significance of Fromm’s insights into the psychosocial loneliness of the modern individual are arguably more relevant than ever before, due to increasing social fragmentation and thus also the growing experience of loneliness and alienation. The need to attach oneself to a community, which would more often than not be online digital communities, has also altered the relationship of the individual to social movements, and thus a new form of analysis of the traditions, values and goals of such online participatory platforms would need to be undertaken. This, however, is beyond the scope of this particular paper, although it certainly lays the platform for such critical interrogation of new forms of digital communities.

5 Further critiques of post-war consumerism in the rise of neo-liberal capitalism can be found in Fromm’s post-war books, *Man For Himself* ([1947] 1999) and *The Sane Society* ([1955] 1990).

6 Fromm’s work falls loosely into the first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory. During his time with the Institute for Social Research (1928–1938), he developed the novel approach of reinterpreting Freudian psychoanalysis as a materialist (Marxian) social psychology, which is both materialist and historical in nature, as he argued that Freudian theory, like Marxian theory, is in fact “exquisitely historical: it seeks to understand the drive structure through the understanding of life history” (Fromm 2005, 479; emphasis added). Kellner suggests that the early Fromm was strongly influenced by his Jewish background and immersion in Judaism and Judaic thought, which contributed to his strong sense of justice, a normative ethic, and a deep commitment to the recognition of community. Fromm eventually broke from the Frankfurt School after personal disagreements with specifically Adorno and Marcuse, the clashes with the latter based on conflicting interpretations of Freud, and Marcuse’s strong commitment to envisioning a secular society and his critique of religious (Judaic) imagery pervasive in Fromm’s writing.

modern man, freed from the bonds of pre-individualistic society, which simultaneously gave him security and limited him, has not gained freedom in the positive sense of the realization of his individual self; that is, the expression of his intellectual, emotional and sensuous potentialities. Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless.

It is as a result of this sentiment of anxiety and isolation to which Fromm refers, that the modern individual seems to have acquired the tendency to adopt and pursue artificially constructed traditions that are in theory supposed to return the individual to participation and communication with other individuals in a wider community. The notion of extreme isolation or loneliness, a theme which Fromm expands upon throughout his body of critical work,⁷ is central to his attempt to understand why humankind freed *from* certain shackles is subsequently unable to fully realise a positive formulation of freedom. As such, for the “freed” individual

[t]his isolation is unbearable and the alternatives he is confronted with are either to escape from the burden of his freedom into new dependencies and submission, or to advance to the full realization of positive freedom which is based upon the uniqueness and individuality of man (Fromm 1969, viii).

There are two particular arguments made by Fromm that need elaboration. Firstly, it is vital to note, as Lawrence Wilde (2004, 3–4) shows, that Fromm’s conception regarding the individual is not “individualism” per se, but is rather based on the potential of *individuality within diversity*. Fromm sees no conflict between the goal of solidarity and uniqueness of the self when he expresses the idea that equality by no means contradicts the notion of a unique self. This is because, in Fromm’s view (1994, 263)

[t]he thesis that men are born equal implies that they all share the same fundamental human qualities, that they share the basic fate of human beings, that they all have the same inalienable claim on freedom and happiness

and thus that “their relationship is one of solidarity, not one of domination-submission”. Importantly, “[w]hat the concept of equality *does not mean* is that all men are alike” (Fromm 1994, 263; emphasis added). For Wilde (2004), Fromm’s concept of the individual can be conceived of as being able to escape from domination, submission and the suppression of freedom (in the modern sense), *through solidarity with other individuals* – and this therefore emphasises equality *in spite of difference* as opposed to equality in uniformity. Difference, in this view, is a qualitative measure where it

becomes something to celebrate only when it does not involve relations of superiority or inferiority. Only on the basis of equality and solidarity can the social conditions be created which will develop the positive side of the peculiarities of persons, sexes, and national groups. The resulting accentuation of difference makes for a “richer and broader human culture” (Wilde 2004, 4).

The impact of this argumentation is clear: that solidarity among individuals can only truly occur when the relationships between individuals are not based upon relations of superiority and inferiority or even uniformity, but a positive recognition of the multitude of differences that inform an individual’s identity in a particular group yearning for a common ideal.

A second argument to be aware of regarding *Escape From Freedom* is that the pre-individualistic society⁸ that Fromm refers to is what would be juxtaposed against a so-called “modern” society. In a pre-individualistic or traditional society, the concept of “community” is often intimately intertwined with its ethical-existential kernel.⁹ This kind of traditional communitarian ethic predates

7 Refer to footnotes 4 and 5.

8 The concept of “pre-individualistic society” is used interchangeably with “traditional society” in the context of this article.

9 This type of ethical-existential essence of community is presented as the foundation of the traditional ubuntu ethic found in various forms among sub-Saharan African tribes, which can be (very) loosely translated as “a person is a person through other persons” (Metz 2011, 536). It is absolutely crucial, however, to be aware that the application of this particular (modern nostalgic) interpretation of ubuntu itself

the individualistic, liberalist human rights legal framework which has been adopted by the West, and strongly emphasises the communal nature of *good* action, a *good/fulfilled* life, *self-realisation* and *non-instrumental rationality* (Fromm 2002). “Freeing” the individual from this pre-individualistic or traditional way of life has been one of the projects of Enlightenment modernity. However, according to Fromm and other critics of modernity, this has *not* been the great developmental leap of progress that it is often posited as being.¹⁰

Fromm emphasises this point in his materialist-psychological model in which human nature is not fully realised through the fulfilment of physiological (primary) needs alone; instead, he points to the fundamental human modes and practices of life, which include “the *need to be related to the world outside oneself*, the *need to avoid aloneness*” (1994, 34; emphasis added). Furthermore, for Fromm, not only does human interaction fulfil psychological needs, but the lack of it has an adverse effect on the mental level, where “[t]o feel completely alone and isolated leads to mental disintegration just as physical starvation leads to death” (ibid.). According to Fromm, the mental, psychological, spiritual, and physical all affect the development of not only a sense of an autonomous self, but also a rational self able to participate in affirmative and meaningful ways in the world around her.

In the following section, the above argument – regarding the need for participation of the individual in meaningful social interactions – will be extended to understanding the effects of the destruction of traditional relations to the world from within the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) firstly, and how they are subsequently extended into the public sphere. This will be considered in the light of tradition as being an important form of social communication – and thus natural to the notion of community itself. Furthermore, this relates to *why* individuals may commit uncritically to participation and interaction in “pseudo” traditions which have been invented precisely to allow existentially lonely individuals to feel part of a greater group with shared values, ideals and goals.

Invented traditions

In *Escape From Freedom*, a crucial observation that Fromm highlights is how such an ethical-existential relationship to the world requires not only physical interaction with others, but also *symbolic participation in community life*. This is vital to the basic argument of the importance of authentic communal engagement:

An individual may be alone in a physical sense for many years and yet he may be related to ideas, values, or at least social patterns that give him a feeling of communion and “belonging”. On the other hand, he may live among people and yet be overcome with an utter feeling of isolation, the outcome of which, if it transcends a certain limit, is the state of insanity which schizophrenic disturbances represent. This lack of relatedness to values, symbols, patterns, we may call moral aloneness and state that moral aloneness is as intolerable as the physical aloneness, or rather that physical aloneness becomes unbearable only if it implies also moral aloneness. The kind of relatedness to the world may be noble or trivial, but even being related to the basest kind of pattern is immensely preferable to being alone. Religion and nationalism, as well as any custom and any belief however absurd and degrading, if it only connects the individual with others, are refuges from what man most dreads: isolation (1994, 34–35).

Thus for Fromm, in the modern attempt to move away from such a *communal-based* ethical-existential principle towards a *legally constituted* ethic of human rights, what in fact occurs is the near-complete amputation of life-worlds from one another, of the aesthetic from the ethical, of political participation from the personal.¹¹ This may then potentially erode a truly communal space for both self-realisation as well as the critique of modern social configurations, which is necessary

can also be used in the cherry-picking/normativising of certain appealing, non-conflictual aspects of a traditional culture, such as that in which the ubuntu ethic was situated. One could go even further in arguing that the selective appropriation of such a traditional, pre-modern, potentially universalistic ethic in a modern, nostalgic context is itself an example of an “invented tradition”.

10 Contrary to the liberal defenders of the Enlightenment – John Rawls, John Stuart Mill, Steven Pinker, etc.

11 This argument is also found in Charles Taylor’s critical communitarian framework, and will be discussed in the final section as complementary to Fromm’s ethic of solidarity.

for both the development of the *autonomous self* as well as for the psychological and spiritual *well-being* of the individual.

In his discussion of Fromm's ethic of solidarity, Wilde (2004) emphasises Fromm's insight that modernity, while quantitatively increasing the modes and opportunities for social interaction, in fact discourages the natural sociality inherent to human beings which is the foundation of all relationships (to self, to others, to the world), and limits such interactions to the public sphere.¹² The private sphere is, consequentially, also adversely affected. This is because social relations are arguably founded and found first and foremost in the communicative life-worlds,¹³ and if those life-worlds become motivated and driven by selfish and egotistical interests instead of by *relationships of solidarity and love with others* (such as within the development of the "culture industries"¹⁴), they carry negatively over into the public sphere with its systems of *communication* and *participation*. Such character virtues become first commercialised and then privatised, and lose their place in the basic structure of social relations.

In light of such insight, one could turn to Hobsbawm's focuses on an analysis of tradition in *The Invention of Tradition* (2000). Tradition in this context, however, is not of ancient inherited traditions, but rather of traditions that are clearly invented, constructed and institutionalised, as well as those which develop more organically but become perceived as reified over a relatively short space of time. "Invented tradition", Hobsbawm (2000, 1) writes,

is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or a symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.

The ideological nature¹⁵ of these invented traditions is thus clearly laid out. Firstly, *these traditions are seen as rules* – either blatantly or implicitly introduced into society; secondly, *these rules are specifically introduced in order to not merely guide behaviour, but rather to direct it in a particular*

12 For clarification of the terms "life-world", "public sphere", and "private sphere" at this point, one turns to the theory of Jürgen Habermas. From the so-called "second generation" of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, and considered to be less pessimistic than the "first generation" regarding the state of the modern world, Habermas emphasised the positive social potentials that developed from post-French Revolution bourgeois society, such as the development of a bourgeois "public sphere", and the separation of the public and private spheres of society. However, he also provides a very forceful critique of at least one of the potential problems that could follow from the (necessary) separation of modern sociopolitical structures of life-world and system. One of these concerns refers to the phenomenon of the "colonisation" of the life-worlds by reified economic and bureaucratic systems (or the "colonisation thesis"). In a chapter of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Vol. 2) titled "The Uncoupling of Systems and Lifeworld" (2006, 153–197), Habermas analyses the effects of the "mediatisation" of the life-world (2006, 196) in which the system "interferes" with the structures of the life-world, disrupting the ability of the members of the life-world to intuitively understand the effects thereof. Habermas is clear that the problem is not the uncoupling of systems integration from social integration, as this process is purportedly consensual and interconnected through action, which would leave the social contexts of action relatively unaltered. However, where it becomes problematic is when *systemic structures interfere with social integration*. As such, "the subjective inconspicuousness of systemic constraints that *instrumentalise* a communicatively structured life-world takes on the character of deception, of objectively false consciousness" (2006, 187). The consequences of this event (of the system colonising the life-world) become even more dubious when considering that these effects which necessarily "*change the structure of contexts of action in socially integrated groups*, have to remain hidden" (ibid.; emphasis added). Furthermore, "[t]he reproductive constraints that instrumentalise a life-world without weakening the illusion of its self-sufficiency have to hide, so to speak, in the pores of communicative action" (ibid.; emphasis in original). In the end, Habermas notes that "systemic mechanisms suppress forms of social integration even in those areas where a consensus-dependent coordination of action cannot be replaced, that is, where the symbolic reproduction of the life-world is at stake" (2006, 196). This leads to what Habermas (2006, 187) calls "structural violence" – and this occurs at the prompting of limits and restrictions that the system places upon communication, to the point that "the interrelation of the objective, social, and subjective world gets prejudged for participants in a typical fashion" (ibid.).

13 These life-worlds, according to Habermas' analysis of the various aspects of the modern private and public spheres, are structured by *culture* (interpretative and value schemas), *society* (legitimate orders of communication for membership of social groups), and *personality* (competences of capabilities for speech and action which ascribe identity to individuals) (cf. Baxter 1987).

14 Very briefly, the "Culture Industry" thesis of Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1931] 1997) is a criticism of modern industrial society which, it is argued, has managed to instrumentalise the higher realm of "culture" – which should be diametrically opposed to "industry" – for profit. They argue that the Culture Industry essentially attempts to hijack the a priori schematisation of the individual's interaction with the world, consciously providing a prejudged and predetermined set of subconscious schemas with which the individual accesses knowledge. See Horkheimer and Adorno (1997) for a deeper analysis of this point.

15 In this context, the term "ideology" refers to what Visagie (1996) identifies as a veritable network of discourses that chain us in our theory as well as in our practice – to a series of atomised (in the sense of unduly privileged) values and goals, thus creating illusionary or distorted perceptions about the world and ourselves.

accepted or desired direction; thirdly, *these behaviours are repeated in order to appear familiar*; fourthly, so as not to seem to be overtly indoctrinating, *these rules are presented as traditions*, as having roots deep within the culture and thus drawing upon the notion of a shared historical identity. This past, upon which it seems to draw, is usually – according to Hobsbawm (1994) – contrived or fictitious.

According to the following analysis, three different but overlapping types of invented traditions are identified in the era since the industrial revolution (Hobsbawm 2000). The first *symbolises and/or establishes ties of community between different individuals and groups*, in either real or artificial communities. In the second case, invented traditions may serve to *establish the authority of certain social or political institutions*, rationalising and thus legitimising their status (and potentially the social and economic relations that develop as a result of their establishment). They may also, in the third instance, serve the purpose of a form of *social behaviourism*, providing blueprints for behaviours and values, inculcating these practices into systems of belief. It is specifically the first kind of invented traditions that this article wishes to focus on, particularly in light of Fromm’s insights into the need for individuals to relate to symbolic forms of social relations to others as part of a greater whole – or community.

Hobsbawm develops his analysis further. To partially counter the change of pace of contemporary life and the unease and fears which could potentially arise from people feeling unstable and uprooted from their own established communities, new rules dictating how people should act in accordance to these novel situations are created and structured in ways which present a (sometimes false) conception of continuity with, familiarity to and stability within deeply-felt solidarities – even if they exist only in the individual’s imagination.¹⁶ Traditions, both real and invented, are therefore rooted in invariance, fixed practices and repetition, which are also their goal. It is the role of “custom”, however, that both drives and directs these traditions. Without prohibiting the change or development of traditions, it does, however, require that these changes be rationalised in a manner that is compatible with its own goals: “What it [custom] does is to give any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent, *social continuity* and natural law as expressed in history” (Hobsbawm 2000, 2; emphasis added). As such, tradition has *become* – and therefore *is* – the rituals, the practices, the rites and paraphernalia, the formal appearances that give shape and belief to the underlying customs of societies. Routines are technical and practical in nature, while traditions provide a sense of continuity with the past.

Invented traditions occur typically when there is a breakdown in society, where transformation occurs so rapidly that fractures occurs in societies themselves and in the social patterns which hold them together and link them to a meaningful past. Furthermore, they will come to the fore when social institutions no longer can or are no longer willing to serve the purposes for which they were originally created, or cannot adapt to new challenges in transformed societies. What is pertinent to the developing argument of how “invented traditions” are the products of an anti-traditional modern society are the forms and materials that can be exhumed from old traditions and used to invent new traditions which serve a particular purpose. These are found in language, rituals and symbols¹⁷ – from the past of the societies in discussions. According to Hobsbawm (2000, 6),

[s]ometimes new traditions could be readily grafted onto old ones, sometimes they could be devised by borrowing from the well-supplied warehouses of official ritual, symbolism and moral exhortation – religion and princely pomp, folklore and freemasonry...

New forms of social structures, such as political and ideological institutions, were unprecedented in

16 This could also be extended to the digital realm where an individual’s participation in an online community often provides her with a sense of solidarity to greater ideals/goals/values supposedly shared by all members of said community. However, this interaction is usually between anonymous participants, as opposed to individual subjects, and the sense of solidarity could thus be illusory – in the sense that the individual invests herself in the community. However, as a digital participant, she is replaceable. As such, the individual needs the online community to feel a sense of belonging, but the online community does not in fact need the actual individual as a subject, only her participation, in order to exist. She is therefore interchangeable with any other online persona although the fantasy provides her with a sense of belonging and – more importantly – recognition.

17 These would also be found in liturgical practices. See Catherine Pickstock (1998; 2000), from the field of critical radical orthodoxy.

the forms in which they arose in the modern era, and “historical continuity had to be invented, for example, by creating an ancient past beyond effective historical continuity, either by semi-fiction... or by forgery...” (Hobsbawm 2000, 7). Traditionalist movements thus will sometimes explicitly and unapologetically cherry-pick the more appealing aspects of old traditions and modify them to fit new agendas, sometimes in order to appeal to and placate the inheritors of oppression by presenting their history in a less repressive light, and sometimes in an attempt to show their status as the repository of rich tradition and culture, and thus historical continuity.¹⁸

Importantly, for Hobsbawm, the breaking down of tradition may be intentionally pursued within anti-traditional movements often found under the guise of *liberalism* and *social change* in the nineteenth century and beyond, creating lacunae from old authorities and social ties which needed to be filled by new invented orders which could then be rationalised through an appeal to tradition – notwithstanding that it could be an invented tradition. Hobsbawm (2000, 8) makes the following astute observation that

a general hostility to irrationalism, superstition and customary practices reminiscent of the dark past, if not actually descended from it, made impassioned believers in the verities of the Enlightenment, such as liberals, socialists, and communists, unreceptive to traditions old or novel.¹⁹

Hobsbawm further contrasts the notion of “all-embracing pseudo-communities” with “traditional rites of passage”, where the latter are considered as strong binding social practices, while the former are vaguer regarding their social membership and the values, beliefs, goals and practices underlying them (Hobsbawm 2000, 10). Concepts such as “loyalty”, “unity”, “patriotism”, “duty” and “spirit” are unspecific beyond the compulsory nature of participating in the symbolic practices which are supposed to inculcate these values in participants – for example, such as standing for a national anthem as opposed to kneeling. These new traditions have arguably only served to fill small parts of social voids left by the increasing secularisation of modern societies.²⁰ In the public lives of citizens, however, these “neo-traditional practices” (Hobsbawm 2000, 12) have strengthened their hold upon the public bodies of individuals and their identification to their particular state.

The important aspects of the idea of invented traditions as being a *particularly modern phenomenon* are, for Hobsbawm (2000, 12), both symptoms and thus also “indicators of problems that might not otherwise have been recognised”.²¹ An uneasy, sick or neurotic society must, according to Fromm (1994), be analysed through the identification of various tensions within it, and the presenting conflict found in the individual and society between old and invented traditions, as unpacked by Hobsbawm, is clearly evidence of deeper psychosocial ills and dis-eases that have arisen out of particular historical conditions.

18 See footnote 8 regarding the traditional African ethic of ubuntu as a possible example of this phenomenon.

19 This position of hostility to traditions, which often translates into a strong paradigm of anti-traditionalism – which Marx, for example, has been accused of adopting – has been sharply critiqued as being itself both *bourgeois* and *elitist* (Mansueti 2002), itself a form of intellectual vanguardism which speaks on behalf of the “common man” and considers him/her as being uneducated, unsophisticated, simple, primitive, and unable to speak for themselves (op. cit. Spivak 2010). This important observation regarding anti-traditionalism will be elaborated upon in the final section, particularly relating to the critique of modernity through a communitarianist analysis – such as that provided by Seyla Benhabib (1992).

20 It was the same line of argumentation that led an astute observer of the philosopher of history, Eric Voegelin, to declare that new and largely unprecedented gods have crept into people’s private lives (Raeder 2007).

21 Pickstock, from the perspective of radical orthodoxy, provides a startlingly similar insight to that of both Hobsbawm and Fromm. In her discussion of liturgical participation as a potential point of resistance to neoliberal modernity, Pickstock (2000, 168; emphasis added) argues that modernity feeds off the illusion of the subjectivity of the individual and thus creates an *artificial sense of participation of the subject within the life-world*: “[M]odernity depends upon *seamless mechanistic repetitions* which no individual can any longer comprehend, or even perceive, and yet which are entirely sustainable. The hidden hand has assumed monstrous and yet self-supporting proportions”. She follows this with a highly prescient warning, the modern pseudo-liturgical [read: pseudo-traditional] order *bypasses subjectivity* altogether, and does not in the end feed off a genuine pre-modern subjectivity because it successfully inaugurates a very minimal *automated subjectivity* which suits its purposes. Literally, people are being converted into cyber-intelligences. Far from this erosion of authentic human subjectivity being threatening for capital, the evidence suggests that the more it gets rid of the pre-modern, the more it knows no barriers to its sway (2000, 168; emphasis added).

Therefore, at the root of accepting and acknowledging the role of a culture, society or community as being both constitutive of one's identity and subjectivity, as well as developing genuine love and reason in *solidarity* with the other, lies the necessity for the authentic interrogation of the role of tradition.²² This is crucial if one wants to adopt a critical normative approach, for example, to communitarianism, and preserve a guarded self-reflective attitude towards conformity and the instrumentalisation of culture.

Generally, in the case of a valued culture that develops into a tradition, it is *subsequent generations* who critique, evaluate, foster, cement, change and refine traditions to the satisfaction of those who have inherited it. Knowingly and intentionally “creating” or “inventing” a tradition (for instrumentalised, contrived, or manipulated outcomes) would therefore entail a great amount of arrogance, which is certainly not beyond conception in late modern/neoliberal capitalism.

Hence, having provided an outline of the psychosocial analysis of the paradox of the loneliness of the contemporary individual in modern society who seeks a sense of belonging, recognition, and stability in constructed and artificial traditions, the final section raises the issue as to whether there can possibly be any way to truly develop one's inherited and acquired freedoms in a positive manner.²³ Fromm's work offers a thorough and valuable analysis of the state of modern society and the consequences of social fragmentation upon the psyche of the individual. He also lays out the rudiments of the framework within which a new form of community should be sought and developed from the normative foundations of love and reason. However, the limits of his theoretical arguments are largely due to the fact that the modern industrial state of the first half of the twentieth century has mutated into new and unprecedented forms, namely those related to post-industrial neoliberalism. Both the life-world and the system have been systematically hijacked by private interests – both political and economic, according to Habermas. Fromm's insights therefore need to be updated and expanded upon to include these new social, historical, political and economic developments for his astute perceptions to remain relevant.

Accordingly, while Fromm provides his readers with the ideals of love and solidarity as ethical imperatives, the works of Charles Taylor and Seyla Benhabib, which are both critical and yet deeply invested in a broad communitarian ethic, can arguably give theoretical weight to Fromm's humanitarian goal. These theorists are sympathetic to Fromm's ultimate project of developing a new communitarian ethic, but their respective theories also systematically elaborate upon the challenges (political and economic) opposing such an ideal in contemporary society. They additionally raise the following important question to consider in light of Fromm's ultimate project: What happens when modernity presents itself as fundamentally anti-traditional?

Critical communitarianism

In *The Sane Society* (1990), Fromm presents the reader with a picture of what his deep ethical-existential project for all humankind entails, in arguing that love and reason must be developed beyond the systemic structures found in the modern world. For Fromm, only then could a world be built which has the obligations of *love and solidarity* at its centre, and this alone will provide humankind with a sense of *rootedness* to the world. This ideal is directly opposed to an “automated subjectivity” (Pickstock 2000, 168) developed from “pseudo” participation in invented traditions.

22 Kwame Gyekye provides a useful definition of “tradition” in *Tradition and Modernity* (1997), where he defines tradition as “*that which comes down or is inherited from the past and becomes an enduring element in the cultural life of a people*” (1997, 218; emphasis added), and furthermore that “a tradition is any *cultural product* that was *created or pursued by past generations* and that, having been accepted and preserved, in whole or in part, by successive generations, has been *maintained to the present*” (1997, 221; emphasis added). The idea of an “invented tradition”, as put forward by Hobsbawm, is therefore for Gyekye an aporia, a contradictory juxtaposition of terms which seems to make no sense. He does, however, add a subtext which does suggest that he is aware of the possibility of using the notion of “invented traditions” as a critical position against exactly what has been mentioned above: *the hubristic and intentional creation of a tradition which pretends to have ancient roots*. Gyekye states that “[i]nvented traditions are thus based on – because fabricated – claims about the longevity of cultural practices. It is possible for a people to make false or dubious claims about their past; such claims would not constitute real traditions: *real traditions are lived, practiced, and held over a very long period of time*” (1997, 230; emphasis added).

23 Such “positive” conceptions of freedom (in the sense of “freedom to ...” as well as merely “freedom from ...”) would have to be both sufficiently self-critical as well as self-reflective in order to avoid falling back into practices that suppress the development of true subjectivity.

There is thus a direct need in Fromm's work for an "explicitly ethical confrontation with modernity" (Wilde 2004, 5), where modern individuals must move from a "having" mode to a "being" mode – where *being* does not imply finality, but constant striving and "sharing of experience" (Fromm 2002, 105).²⁴

Wilde highlights the important point that in Fromm's conception of a humanist imperative, there are unavoidable political, social, as well as ethical aspects to "being". According to Wilde (2004, 5–6),

[h]uman flourishing can become a reality only when the concern for the welfare of all humanity prevails over competing priorities for power and profit. This concern really exists in our daily experiences, in acts of consideration and kindness, and it is something that needs to be extricated, articulated, and politicized.

It is in light of attempting to "extricate", "articulate", and even "politicise" this concern for the welfare of all of humankind above power and profit, while simultaneously attempting to be aware of the same competition for our (human beings') commitments, goals and values on a daily basis, that one could turn to find allies in the *communitarian-based* theories of, firstly, Charles Taylor, and, secondly, the critical feminist thinker, Seyla Benhabib, whose writing extends beyond a strictly critical theory paradigm to encompass one of *cosmopolitan communitarianism*.

In an essay titled *Atomism* (1985), Charles Taylor unpacks his argument for a commitment to communitarianism. In the first place, he takes issue with the liberalist foundations of individual human rights discourse, which is based upon the rights of the individual as having particular capacities (such as sentience). Instead, Taylor argues for a *normative base* for attaching rights to a particular capacity, assuming that it is a capacity worth respecting and thus has moral value.

Like Fromm, Taylor argues in favour of a *moral/ethical imperative* to develop these capacities – for if these capacities are respected and are of moral worth, then surely we (humankind) have a commitment to develop these capacities, to extend and nurture them. For if we see them as worthy of moral consideration and respect, we consider them as *potentially good*, and thus *socially desirable*. We ought to thus both develop these capacities within ourselves and in larger society. In other words, there is a great qualitative distinction between recognising the right to develop oneself, and in recognising the worth of the human capacity to develop oneself. The addition of the adage of the ethical obligation to develop oneself to the full extent of our human capacities as being central to the very notion of social and political life changes both the conception of such an egalitarian society as well as of the individual's role within society.

Furthermore, it (the ethical imperative to develop oneself) provides a critical angle, which emphasises the *obligation* of society to engender within the individual a desire to consider not only one's individual rights as the end in itself, but also individual rights in the greater whole. Thus, for Taylor (1985, 194–195),

[t]o affirm the worth of the human capacity to form moral and religious convictions goes far beyond the assertion of the right to one's convictions. It also says that I ought to become the kind of agent who is capable of authentic conviction, that I ought to be true to my own convictions and not live a lie or self-delusion out of fear or for favour, that I ought in certain circumstances to help foster this capacity in others, that I ought to bring up my own children to have it, that I ought not to inhibit it in others by influencing them towards a facile and shallow complaisance, and so on.

As such, it is reminiscent of Fromm that Taylor (1985, 190) argues the following point:

²⁴ Benhabib (1992, 11, 68–88) makes a distinction between two forms of communitarian thought: the "integrationist" and the "participationist". The "integrationist" approach is an attempt at reconstituting ("recouping and reclaiming" – Benhabib 1992, 11) values, ideals and principles of an older (pre-modern) form of communal life. The "participationist" approach conceives of such a (communal) society as organically growing "from common action, engagement and debate in the civic and public realms of democratic societies" (Benhabib 1992, 11).

What then does it mean to say that men are self-sufficient alone? That they would survive outside of society? Clearly, lots of men would not. And the best and luckiest would survive only in the most austere sense that they would not succumb. It would not be living as we know it.

The critical foundation of Charles Taylor's arguably communitarian framework for human rights is thus unambiguous in its appeal to the individual to develop authentic convictions and stay true to them, but also the notion that the individual should not distort the development of authentic convictions in others. In this he recognises the fact which has been made abundantly clear in Horkheimer and Adorno's central critiques in the "Culture Industry" thesis, and which is reaffirmed by Fromm in *Escape From Freedom* and Hobsbawm's observations in *The Invention of Tradition* – that these seemingly authentic convictions which shape the individual can essentially be hijacked by outside forces for instrumental purposes.²⁵ This point is fundamental for the discussion of the critiques of invented traditions provided by Hobsbawm.

Fromm, like Taylor, frames his theory of ethical normativity as encompassing, on the one hand, a form of *virtue ethics* committed to genuine love for and reciprocal sympathy towards humankind as integral to the development and flourishing of human potential. On the other hand, he seems to advocate for a *communalist ethics* in which the individual cannot develop the genuine love needed to reach the potential of being without communal solidarity with the peoples of the world. This form of solidarity is both ethical and existential, an ideal of both feeling and acting. The individual is thus a rational, self-aware and imaginative being whose potentiality can only be realised in the development of love with and for others.

Benhabib develops this potential alliance between communitarianism and Critical Theory in a chapter titled *Communitarianism and Social Critical Theory in Dialogue* (1992). Here, she lays open a critique of the two major political theories of the past two centuries, namely Liberalism and Marxism, as being most closely linked to the original project (and the subsequent furthering) of modernity. Effectively, Benhabib argues that Liberalism, from a communitarian perspective, provides a problematic narrative regarding the historical progress of modernity. Not only is this view of modernity as progress "illusory", but she also argues that "history has brought with it irreversible losses such as a *coherent sense of community* and a moral vocabulary which was part of a shared social universe" (1992, 69; emphasis added).²⁶

Marxism (at least from a postmodern perspective),²⁷ as one of the chosen ideologies of modernisation of third-world elites in particular,²⁸ has similarly (to Liberalism) been instrumental

25 According to Kellner (2002), culture, which historically was considered a realm of beauty, truth and the good, was also to become subsumed into an instrumental form of rationality ("rationalisation, standardisation, and conformity"), essentially leading towards the "end of the individual" (Kellner 2002, 1). Importantly, particularly in light of the argument of this article, culture as such is not vilified by Adorno and the more pessimistic of the Frankfurt School; rather, culture can and should still be a realm untouched by instrumental rationality which pervades so many aspects of our modern society, and should potentially act as a point of critique and opposition to these nefarious forms of instrumentalised reason. Adorno (1967, 30; in Kellner 2002, 2) states that the task of (cultural) criticism must be not so much to search for the particular interest-groups to which cultural phenomena are to be assigned, but rather to decipher the general social tendencies which are expressed in these phenomena and through which the most powerful interests realize themselves. Cultural criticism must become social physiognomy. The more the whole divests itself of all spontaneous elements, is socially mediated and filtered, is "consciousness", the more it becomes "culture".

26 Benhabib's thorough arguments relating to this discussion can be found in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Benhabib 1992). Also cf. Amy Gutmann (1985), Will Kymlicka (1989), Charles Taylor (1989), and Michael Walzer (1990).

27 According to Benhabib, this postmodern critique differs from the communitarian critique in that its point of critique is not the disregard of a pre-modern communal way of life, but rather in the disregard of understanding the subject, where [t]he Promethean self [of humanity as malleable, of coming into its full nature in its mastery over nature and the external world] privileges mastery over *jouissance* (Lacan) and the joyful enjoyment of others; in its narcissistic search for the domination of nature, it is possessed by an instrumental logic and fails to appreciate the mode of being of the non-instrumental "others" (Benhabib 1992, 69).

28 One can infer that in this critique of Marxism as an anti-traditionalist "ideology of third-world elites", Benhabib is referring to a number of twentieth century appropriations of Marxism in which cultural, ethnic, and traditional purges took place, three examples of which are Marxism-Leninism and Stalinism in the USSR, from which followed a number of cultural, ethnic, and religious purges; the Cultural Revolution which led to the elimination of both traditional and capitalist elements in Chairman Mao Zedong in the People's Republic of China; ethnic nationalism and violence which took place in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia under Tito.

in the ultimate *destruction of pre-modern/traditional communities* and the lives of these peoples.²⁹

In a recognisable vein to the project of Fromm and the first-generation critical theorists (Horkheimer, in particular),³⁰ Benhabib finds points of epistemological and political commonalities between critical social theory and communitarianism, particularly the “*rejection of ahistorical and atomistic conceptions of the self and society*” as well as the concern with “*the loss of public spiritedness and participatory politics in contemporary society*” (1992, 70; emphasis added). Communitarianist thinkers (at least in the theories of thinkers such as Charles Taylor, as discussed above, as well as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, and Michael Waltzer) can contribute invariably to critical theory, particularly in its powerful critique of the Enlightenment project’s insistence upon framing the individual as a fully and wholly autonomous rational being.³¹

Benhabib thus follows the communitarianist critique of Enlightenment liberalism as being strongly sceptical of the notion that we (human beings) can adopt “the view from nowhere”, and that we as such are “unencumbered” beings. She points to Habermas’ theory of humans as evolving self-identity only through intersubjectivity as being crucial, and clarifies this view as follows: “The ‘I’ becomes an ‘I’ only among a ‘we’, in a community of speech and action (Benhabib 1992, 71).³² Furthermore, according to Benhabib, Habermas³³ (in an argument compatible with Fromm’s and Taylor’s views) also finds that “[i]ndividuation does not precede association; rather it is the *kinds of associations which we inhabit* that define the kinds of individuals we will become” (1992, 71; emphasis added).³⁴ This links closely to the conception of authentic associations and convictions which are encouraged by Fromm and Taylor, for example, and for which Hobsbawm and Fromm provide caution against the potential for the hijacking and distortion of the development of subjectivity through invented traditions, pseudo-liturgical practices, or automaton conformity.

Importantly, there is also a potential criticism of traditional communitarianism which Benhabib points out, which it is important to be cognisant of, and that is the failure to separate “the significance of constitutive communities for the formation of one’s identity with a *socially conventionalist and morally conformist attitude*” (Benhabib 1992, 74; emphasis added). This again overlaps with Fromm’s insistence that communal or social solidarity does not – and should not – result in conformity. The risk/danger, however, is worth noting and cautioning against. This includes maintaining a critical awareness of instances of authoritarianism, social conformism, patriarchy – especially in light of traditionalism. It is important to acknowledge that this critical distinction is also both a modern and a necessary one, particularly in the face of the instrumentalisation of tradition (as has been argued in the previous section).

A final word

In *Religion and Psychoanalysis* (1955, 1–2), Fromm argues that mankind has come to a point

29 See Benhabib (1992).

30 In this, she follows a concern which is found in Horkheimer’s inaugural lecture at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, in 1931, titled *The State of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research*. In this lecture, Horkheimer highlights the shortcomings of both the modern (liberal) social sciences and philosophy (in both traditional social theory as well as his own novel proposal for a truly critical theory) in dealing with the relationship between human beings *both as individuals and as members of communities* in contemporary society. He argues that social theory should have as its central point of research, in particular ...the vicissitudes of human fate – the fate of humans not as mere individuals, however, but as members of a *community*. [Critical social theory] is thus above all concerned with phenomena that can only be understood in the context of *human social life*: with the state, law, economy, religion – in short, with the *entire material and intellectual/spiritual culture [geistige Kultur] of humanity*” ([1931] 1993, 1–14; emphasis added).

31 According to Benhabib (1992), a communitarian critique (as well as feminist and postmodernist critiques) is sceptical towards the view that “reason” alone is the foundation for the formation of a moral perspective. This form of critical communitarianism also questions the autonomy of the traditional universalist ego, and has lifted the veil on the limitations of a universalist concept of reason to deal with the material realities of multiple (and complex) ways of life which face modern society. Importantly, this is not a critique of universalism per se, but rather a concern with the legislative imperative given to universalism post-Enlightenment, as opposed to a form of interactive universalism, which is critical of and problematises its own assumptions and foundations (immanent critique), and which is sensitive to context and history (particularly with regard to gender).

32 This formulation is clearly reminiscent of that of the traditional ubuntu ethic discussed above.

33 See Habermas (1975).

34 Benhabib does also, however, show potential inconsistencies in Habermas’ development of this line of thought, particularly as he himself tends to prioritise the right (juridical) over the good (virtue), and thus defends a form of deontological ethics.

– through scientific and technological advancements – where the fulfilments of cherished hopes could become a reality, where we could provide food, shelter and physical security for all of humankind. Fromm argues that

[l]ooking at his [humanity’s] creation, he can say, truly, it is good. But looking at himself what can he say? Has he come closer to the realization of another dream of mankind, that of the perfection of man? Of man loving his neighbour, doing justice, speaking truth, and realizing that which he potentially is, an image of God? Raising the question is embarrassing since the answer is so painfully clear. While we have created wonderful things, we have failed to make of ourselves beings for whom this tremendous effort would seem worthwhile. Ours is a life not of brotherliness, happiness, contentment, but of spiritual chaos and bewilderment dangerously close to a state of madness – not the hysterical kind of madness which existed in the Middle Ages, but a madness akin to schizophrenia in which the contact with inner reality is lost and thought is split from affect.

This particular dialectical critique of modernity is by no means unique to Fromm, nor is it novel in its argument for the need to confront the extreme individualism inherent in the modern *Weltanschauung* instead of furthering it.³⁵ This critique of modernity is found deeply embedded in 19th century thinkers such as Nietzsche, Hegel, Marx and Weber,³⁶ and extends through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries into the stream of postmodernist and post-structuralist theories through the likes of Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, and Rancière. However, what seems to be lacking in these thinkers is the normative stance of reconceptualising the *necessity of human self-realisation* into the context of both *society* and more particularly, specific *communities*, in order to halt the progression of the incorporation of modern psychological maladies into the development of instrumental rationality – while simultaneously claiming to be the cure.

As such, one could alternatively turn to the thoughts of some modern thinkers who advocate, like Fromm, for a *critical communitarianism* as opposed to a *critical individualism*. These thinkers all attempt to confront modernity with force, drawing on a multitude of ideas to augment their arguments.³⁷ They also offer an alternative conception of the individual as the sole executive of reason and, like Fromm, see the potential of humankind intimately connected to the individual’s authentic relationship to society and other beings.

When attempting to elaborate upon Fromm’s initial analyses regarding the extreme loneliness suffered by people in a post-Enlightenment society, one cannot help but consider the role that the breakdown of traditional communities has played in bringing this condition about. Fromm’s conception of a new form of radical humanism is founded upon solidarity, itself an ethical imperative as part of the development of the potential towards a “productive character orientation”,³⁸ or a kind of communitarian virtue ethics. He also argues that the individual in her desire to escape from her new-found loneliness is willing to uncritically adopt traditions which promise to include her in new forms of community engagement. A further analysis attempts to show how modern capitalist industries draw upon this deep *tension* and *unease* that modern individuals and societies have with the past. This relies upon the yearning for the feeling of *membership* and *belonging* on both a

35 In an attempt to bring forth a greater sense of individual rationalism that would overcome the issues resulting from the very veneration of Enlightenment reason itself (see Michel Foucault’s essay titled “What is Enlightenment?”, in Foucault and Rabinow 1984).

36 To name but a few.

37 Catherine Pickstock (1998; 2000), for example, turns to the role of *liturgy* in the life-world of the Polis as a model for the development of subjectivity and empathy (and critique) towards the world around one. Seyla Benhabib (1992), from a different angle of *feminism* and *cosmopolitanism*, provides a critique of liberalism and Marxism as being fundamentally anti-traditional modern ideologies which have contributed to the development of instrumental rationality.

38 Briefly, the “productive character orientation” (1999, 82) is Fromm’s normative ideal. According to Fromm, all human beings have the capacity to be productive – by which he means spontaneous, creative, imaginative – in their orientation to life. Productive characters are able to animate creativity, reason, imagination and love not only in themselves, but also in other people – and in the world they interact with. The “productive” orientation is a relation of relatedness to the world, which “refers to a fundamental attitude, a mode of relatedness in all realms of human experience. It covers mental, emotional, and sensory responses to others, to oneself, and to things” (84). Furthermore, a productive character orientation is founded upon love, which is “the productive form of relatedness to others and to oneself. It implies responsibility, care, respect and knowledge, and the wish for the other person to grow and develop” (110).

political and social level beyond the empty symbolism of vacuous rituals, for a sense of historical continuity which ideally should provide an anchor to where we come from and what our values and beliefs are.

The psychosocial analysis provided by Fromm of the “escape from freedom” and consequent extreme loneliness experienced by individuals in modern society, both compliments and fleshes out the more socio-historical analysis by Hobsbawm of “invented traditions”. In investigating the dependency of the modern form of living upon traditional forms, at least in an instrumentalised manner, “traditions”, and more specifically the notion of “invented traditions” need to be interrogated. There are three features of invented tradition which become salient in such an analysis: firstly, these are social phenomena which are turned to by modern individuals in order to *escape from their severe isolation and loneliness*; secondly, they could as such possibly be a *path of resistance and counter-hegemony against the totalising individuality of modernity*; and thirdly, this potential could be *hijacked by the very ideological systems against which it stands, consumed back into the functioning of modernity and sold to individuals* as a pre-packaged and specifically designed illusion of escape from the realities of contemporary life.

A critical communitarianism therefore responds by arguing for rediscovered relationships of solidarity and love which are activated in meaningful communication and participation with others, and which are subsequently carried over from our private to our public lives.

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