

Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society* (1887)

Abstract

Sociologist and economist Ferdinand Tönnies published the classic text *Community and Civil Society* in 1887. In the featured sections, Tönnies describes the characteristics of a community or a society. According to Tönnies, in a community, people are united on the basis of personal relationships. In a society, on the other hand, people are not connected on the basis of an overarching category such as religiousness. Rather, members of a society come together deliberately on the basis of rational considerations.

Source

Book One: A general classification of key ideas

The argument

The wills of human beings interact in many different ways. Every such relationship is reciprocal – on the one side active or assertive, on the other passive or acquiescent. These interactions are of such a kind that they tend either to support the mental and physical well-being of the other party or to destroy them – they are either positive or negative. My theory will concentrate on investigating only relationships that are based on positive mutual affirmation. Every relationship of this kind involves some kind of balance between unity and diversity. This consists of mutual encouragement and the sharing of burdens and achievements, which can be seen as expressions of people's energies and wills. The social group brought into existence by this positive relationship, envisaged as functioning both inwardly and outwardly as a unified living entity, is known by some collective term such as a *union, fraternity or association*.^[1] The relationship itself, and the social bond that stems from it, may be conceived either as having real organic life, and that is the essence of *Community* [*Gemeinschaft*]; or else as a purely mechanical construction, existing in the mind, and that is what we think of as *Society* [*Gesellschaft*]. If we look at the ways in which these two terms are applied we shall see that they are conventionally used in German as synonyms. Up till now they have been confused in technical terminology, being employed interchangeably. So a few observations at the outset may establish their contrasting usages.

All kinds of social co-existence that are familiar, comfortable and exclusive are to be understood as belonging to *Gemeinschaft*. *Gesellschaft* means life in the public sphere, in the outside world. In *Gemeinschaft* we are united from the moment of our birth with our own folk for better or for worse. We go out into *Gesellschaft* as if into a foreign land. A young man is warned about mixing with bad society; but 'bad community' makes no sense in our language. Lawyers may use the term 'domestic society'^[2] when they are thinking of such a relationship merely in its social and public aspects, but 'domestic *community*' with its infinite effects upon the human soul will be understood intuitively by anyone who has ever experienced it. In the same way an engaged couple recognise that in entering into marriage they are embarking upon a total community of life (*communio totius vitae*); but a 'society of life' would be a contradiction in terms.^[3] You can 'keep someone company', but no one can offer another person 'community' in that casual way. You may be received into a religious community; but religious societies, like other bodies set up for whatever purpose, exist only for some extraneous goal, such as serving the state or to promote some theory. We have a community of language, custom, belief; but a society for purposes of business, travel, or scientific knowledge. Commercial partnerships are of particular importance; but even though a certain

fellowship and community may exist among business partners, we would hardly speak of a 'commercial community'. And it would sound quite revolting to make the linguistic compound 'joint-stock community'. On the other hand community of ownership certainly exists, as in the case of fields, woods and pasture. No one would describe the common ownership of property between man and wife as a 'society of property'.^[4]

Thus many differences between the two concepts become apparent. In the most universal sense we could speak of a Community that is inclusive of all mankind, such as the Church claims to be. But ordinary human 'Society' we understand simply as individuals living alongside but independently of one another. In recent times there has been talk, in academic discussion, of the 'Society' of a country as opposed to 'the state'; and we shall make use of this conception here, though its meaning only becomes fully apparent in terms of a more deep-seated contrast with the 'Community' of the common people. Community [*Gemeinschaft*] is old, Society [*Gesellschaft*] is new, both as an entity and as a term. This has been recognised by an author whose teaching of political theory is otherwise more notable for its broadness of range than for deep penetration. "The entire concept of Society in the social and political sense", states Bluntschli (*Staatswörterbuch*, IV), "has its natural basis in the habits and the outlook of the third estate. It is not really an idea referring to the whole people, but merely to the concept of the third estate . . . it is the latter's notion of 'Society' that has become the source of collective prejudices and trends, while at the same time becoming the vehicle of their expression . . . Wherever urban culture flourishes, 'Society' also appears as its indispensable medium. Country people know little of it." ^[5] On the other hand, everyone who praises rural life has pointed to the fact that people there have a stronger and livelier sense of Community. Community means genuine, enduring life together, whereas Society is a transient and superficial thing. Thus *Gemeinschaft* must be understood as a living organism in its own right, while *Gesellschaft* is a mechanical aggregate and artefact.

[...]

The Theory of *Gemeinschaft*

In tune with the argument so far, the theory of *Gemeinschaft* is based on the idea that in the original or natural state there is a complete unity of human wills. This sense of unity is maintained even when people become separated. It takes various forms, depending on how far the relationship between differently situated individuals is predetermined and 'given'. The common root of these relationships is the all-embracing character of the sub-conscious, 'vegetative' life that stems from birth: human wills, each one housed in a physical body, are related to one another by descent and kinship; they remain united, or become so out of necessity. This direct mutual affirmation is found in its most intense form in three types of relationships: namely, (1) that between a mother and her child; (2) that between a man and a woman as a couple, as this term is understood in its natural or biological sense; and (3) that between those who recognise each other as brothers and sisters, i.e. offspring at least of the same mother. While the seed of *Gemeinschaft*, or the bias of human minds towards it, is to be seen in any relationship of kinsfolk, these three are of special importance as containing the seeds which are strongest and most readily nurtured. Each of them is significant in its own special way.

A) The relationship between mother and child is most deeply rooted in pure instinct and *pleasure*^[6] and at the same time the shading over from a physical to a purely spiritual^[7] relationship is here at its most apparent, particularly at the very beginning. The relationship implies a long duration, because the mother is responsible for the nurture, protection and management of the child until it is capable of nourishing, protecting and managing itself. As this happens, the relationship loses its element of necessity, and separation becomes more likely. This tendency can, however, be counteracted by other factors, such as by growing *accustomed* to one another and sharing *memories* of the joy they have given each other, or else by the gratitude of the child for all the trouble the

mother has taken on its behalf. These direct mutual connections are reinforced by others which link the pair with matters outside themselves - pleasure, habit, and memory unite them with things in their environment which from the beginning were agreeable, or which became so; for example, familiar, helpful, loving people, such as the father may be, if he lives together with his wife, or the brothers and sisters of the mother or the child, and so on.

B) The *sexual instinct* does not make permanent co-habitation necessary; to begin with it leads less to equal partnership than to one-sided subjugation of the woman, who, being by nature weaker, can be reduced to slavery and a mere object of possession. Thus the relationship between a *married couple*, regarded independently of family networks and related social forces, must be maintained chiefly by accommodation to each other, if the relationship is to be moulded into one of permanent mutual affirmation. Contributory factors already mentioned understandably play their part here, particularly the relation with children they have produced together, as well as the sharing of household and possessions.

C) Between *siblings* there is no such fundamental, instinctive liking and natural recognition of one another as there is between a mother and her child, or between partners of the opposite sex. The husband-wife relationship can, of course, *coincide* with the brother-sister one, and there is good reason to believe that this was frequently the case among many tribes at an earlier period of human history. We must remember that wherever and whenever descent was reckoned on the mother's side, the corresponding generations of cousins were described and regarded as brothers and sisters. This was so common that the restricted meaning of the term *Geschwister*^[8] as in many other cases, dates from a much later outlook. Through similar developments among the most important ethnic groups, marriage between brothers and sisters came to be eliminated; where exogamy was practised this meant no marriage with blood relatives, although more distant relatives might be permitted to marry. As a result, the love between siblings can be regarded as the most 'human' of relationships between human beings, even though it is based essentially on ties of blood.^[9] It is evident in this case, that in contrast to the other types of relationship, instinct is at its weakest, and instead *memory*^[10] seems to play the strongest part in creating, maintaining and consolidating emotional ties. When children of the same mother live together and remain together, they are almost bound to connect their individual recollections of happy impressions and experiences with the characters and activities of the others (if we discount all the causes of enmity that may work in the opposite direction). The more this group is threatened from outside, the more bonding together will be likely to occur, because circumstances impose the need to stick together, to fight and act collectively. The habit derived from this co-operation makes life together easier and more cherished. At the same time we can expect the highest degree of similarity of character and abilities among brothers - even though differences in intelligence and experience, in so far as these are purely human factors, may well be accentuated.

[...]

The Theory of *Gesellschaft*

The theory of *Gesellschaft* takes as its starting point a group of people who, as in *Gemeinschaft*, live peacefully alongside one another, but in this case without being essentially united – indeed, on the contrary, they are here essentially detached. In *Gemeinschaft* they stay together in spite of everything that separates them; in *Gesellschaft* they remain separate in spite of everything that unites them. As a result, there are no activities taking place which are derived from an *a priori* and pre-determined unity and which therefore express the will and spirit of this unity through any individual who performs them. Nothing happens in *Gesellschaft* that is more important for the individual's wider group than it is for himself. On the contrary, everyone is out for himself alone and living in a state of tension against everyone else. The various spheres of power and activity are sharply demarcated, so that everyone resists contact with others and excludes them from his own spheres, regarding any such overtures as

hostile. Such a *negative* attitude is the normal and basic way in which these power-conscious people relate to one another, and it is characteristic of *Gesellschaft* at any given moment in time. Nobody wants to do anything for anyone else, nobody wants to yield or give anything unless he gets something in return that he regards as at least an *equal* trade-off. Indeed it is essential that it should be more desirable to him than whatever he has already, for only by getting something that seems better can he be persuaded to give up something good. If everyone shares such desires, it is obvious that occasions may arise when object 'a' may be better for person 'B' than object 'b', and likewise object 'b' may be better for person 'A' than object 'a'; it is, however, *only* in the context of such relations that 'a' can be better than 'b' at the same time as 'b' is better than 'a'. This provokes the question: can we in any sense at all speak of the 'quality' or 'value' of things independently of such relationships?

The answer is this: as will be demonstrated, all goods are assumed to be separate from each other, and so are their owners. Whatever anyone has and enjoys, he has and enjoys to the *exclusion* of all others – in fact, there is no such thing as a 'common good'. Such a thing *can* only exist by means of a *fiction* on the part of the individuals concerned. It is only possible when they *invent* or manufacture a common personality with its own will, to whom the common *value system* has to relate. Such fictions are not of course invented without sufficient reason. But sufficient reason does indeed exist in the simple act of giving and receiving an object, because during this process contact takes place and *common ground* emerges which is sought by both parties. This lasts as long as the time taken for the "transaction," which can be almost no time at all or can be envisaged as extending for as long as you like. During this period the object which is being released from the sphere of 'A' has ceased to be completely under his will and control, but has not yet passed completely under the will and control of 'B'. It is still under the *partial* control of 'A' but *already* under the *partial* control of 'B'. It is dependent on both parties, in so far as their wills are acting in unison, as is the case while the will to give and receive continues. During this moment or period the object being exchanged represents common good or *social value*. The shared *will* to complete the transaction can be seen as constituting a sort of common or unified will, in that it *requires* each party to continue with the twofold act until it is completed. This 'will' must necessarily be regarded as a unity, since it is considered to be a 'person', or at least 'personality' is imputed to it; for to think of something as a 'being' or a 'thing' is the same as thinking of it as having a coherent unified identity.

Here, however, we must be careful to distinguish whether and to what extent such a fictitious entity exists *only* in theory, as a *philosophical* construct or hypothesis; or whether and when it also exists in the minds of the parties who conjured it up for a particular purpose (assuming that they are in fact capable of shared willing and acting). And the scene is different again if the two parties are conceived as mere *participants* in the creation of something objective in the scientific sense (meaning something that "everybody" necessarily *has* to think). It must of course be understood that every act of giving and receiving which happens in the way we have described *implicitly* involves a social will. Now such an action is inconceivable without its own intrinsic rationale or purpose i.e. the assumed exchange of gifts; which requires that the one action cannot precede the other – they have to take place at the same time. To put the thought in a different way, offer and acceptance on both sides must exactly *coincide*. So the *exchange* itself, as a unified single act, forms the *content* of the fictitious social will. In relation to this will the goods or values exchanged are exactly *equal*. This equality constitutes the judgement of value, which is *binding* for both parties, because they were united in making it. It may last only for the period or moment of the exchange, but within these limits it must look like a judgement which has been reached by "everybody", if it is going to be objective or universally valid. Therefore everyone is deemed to have one and the same will; the will to exchange becomes universal. Everyone takes part in and endorses the individual act, so that it becomes an entirely public act.

On the other hand, the general public may reject that individual act. They may say: a is not equal to b, it is greater

or smaller than b, which means that things are not being exchanged according to their proper values. The true value is what everyone regards as its value, as recognised by Society in general; it is accepted as the rational and correct value, only when everyone has agreed on it as a matter of necessity rather than chance. The will of the people can be imagined as united and concentrated in the person of a skilled judge who weighs, measures and passes an objective judgement. All members of the public have to recognise this and behave accordingly, if they are themselves rational and capable of objective thought, and thus use the same criteria for weighing things up.

[...]

Appendix

Conclusions and future prospects

[...]

To conclude our overall assessment; we have two contrasting epochs in the grand overall development of civilisation: an epoch of market-based civil Society follows an epoch of close-knit Community. Community is signified through its social will as concord, custom and religion; Society is signified through its social will as convention, policy and public opinion. These concepts correspond to certain types of external social arrangements, which I shall identify in the following tables:

A. Community [*Gemeinschaft*]

1. Family life = concord. Man is involved in this with all his being. Its core is the *tribe, nation or common people*.
2. Village life = custom (traditional morality). Man is involved here with all his heart and soul. Its core is the *commonwealth*.
3. Town life = religion. Man is involved in this with his entire conscience. Its core is the *Church*.

B. Society [*Gesellschaft*]

1. Big city life = convention. This is based on the individual human being with all his ambitions. Its core is *competitive market Society in its most basic form*.
2. National life = politics and policy. This is based on man's collective calculations. Its core is the *State*.
3. Cosmopolitan life — public opinion. This is determined by man's consciousness. Its core is the *republic of letters*.

Each of these categories is closely bound up with a predominant occupational sphere and a predominant mental outlook, which may be paired together as follows:

A. Community

1. Domestic economy and household management: based on liking or preference, i.e., the love of nurturing, creating and preserving. The norms for this are set by sympathy and mutual understanding.
2. Agriculture: based on routine and habits, i.e. on regularly repeated tasks. The extent of working co-operation is revealed in custom.
3. Art and craft: based on memories, i.e. of teaching received and rules absorbed, and of original ideas. The minds of the artists and craftsmen are united in a belief in their work.

B. Society

1. Commerce: based on foresight: i.e. attention, comparison and calculation are the basic conditions for all business. Trade is the essence of rational action. Contract is the custom and creed of commerce.
2. Industry: based on decisions: i.e. rational productive deployment of capital and sale of labour. Regulations rule the factory.

3. Science and learning: based on conceptual thought, as is self-evident. From hypotheses it develops its own laws and presents its facts and theories, which pass into literature and the press, and thus into public opinion.

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NOTES

[1] *eine Verbindung* – translatable as union, association, connection, combination, alliance, etc. Elsewhere in the book Tönnies uses the word specifically to mean the kind of holistic organic bonding that he attributes to *Gemeinschaft*, but here it is used in a more general way to cover groups in both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.

[2] *Die häusliche Gesellschaft* was the term used to define a three-generational household unit, made up of a married couple, elderly parents and children, under the Prussian Natural Law Code of 1794 [Deutsches Rechtswörterbuch (Wörterbuch der älteren deutschen Rechtssprache), 7 vols. (Weimar: L. Böhlau Nachfolger, 1914-83), vol. IV, p. 503].

[3] *Communio totius vitae*, not a term commonly used by Roman lawyers, but *communio* implied an indissoluble partnership. Tönnies may have had in mind early Roman marriage laws, before the erosion of restrictions on divorce under the later Roman republic and the empire. *Societas vitae*, on the other hand, was a term in Roman law [T. Mommsen, *The Digest of Justinian* (1870), English trans. Alan Watson, vols. I–IV (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), vol. II, book xxv, p. 733].

[4] *eine Güter-Gesellschaft* = a contract-based property partnership which could be dissolved by agreement of the parties. Again, not a standard Roman law term, but it had been used in the Roman law-based code of Baden in 1808 (*Deutsches Rechtswörterbuch*, vol. IV, p. 1327)

[5] J. G. Bluntschli and R. Bradter, *Deutsches Staatswörterbuch*, 12 vols. (Stuttgart and Leipzig: 1859), vol. IV, p. 247. By the ‘third estate’ Bluntschli and earlier users of the term meant, not the mass of the people, but those with a stake in civil society, i.e. the *bürgerlich* class.

[6] *der Gefallen* = pleasure, liking, preference. The term is linked in this paragraph with *die Gewöhnung* (custom, habit) and *das Gedächtnis* (memory) to form one of Tönnies’s favourite rhetorical triads.

[7] *geistig* = spiritual, mental, intellectual, psychological

[8] *die Geschwister* = siblings, brother(s) and sister(s).

[9] i.e. human as opposed to purely ‘natural’

[10] *das Gedächtnis* = memory or recollection, but often used by Tönnies to mean something rather broader, like a shared ‘frame of reference’.

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