

FERDINAND TÖNNIES

*Community and
Civil Society*

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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.

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*.

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

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. Böhlaus 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).

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.

2

Everything that is ‘real’ is organic,⁶ in the sense that it must be seen in conjunction with the whole material world, which governs its nature and

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 Almost certainly meant as an echo of Hegel’s ‘alles Wirkliche ist vernünftig’ (F. Tönnies, ‘Neue Philosophie der Geschichte: Hegel, Marx, Comte’, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 7 (1894), p. 487). In this second paragraph (and at many later points in the book) Tönnies abruptly switches from treating human relations as purely social arrangements to discussing them as though they were ‘bodies’ and ‘forces’ in the natural world. The reader should bear in mind his claim, not always crystal clear in the text, that his biological and mechanical models were not literal but analogical.

SECTION I

The Theory of *Gemeinschaft*

I

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'¹ 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*,² and at the same time the shading over from

¹ *vegetative* – the term applied by Tönnies to the sphere of organic life below the level of either sensation or thought, such as digestion or blood circulation.

² *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.

this does often happen; greater power in general means greater ability to render assistance [to others]; if it exists at all, the instinct to help will be much more effective if it is accompanied by power, which is in itself a kind of will to act. And, particularly within these organic kin-based relationships, the stronger party feels an instinctive, spontaneous *tenderness* towards the weak, a desire to help and protect, which is bound up with pride of possession and the enjoyment of his own power.

5

I shall use the terms *rank* or *authority*⁹ for any superior power which is exercised for the benefit of inferiors or in accordance with their will and therefore accepted by them. Three kinds of such authority can be distinguished: the authority of age, the authority of physical strength, and the authority of wisdom or intellect. These are united in the authority which belongs to the *father* at the head of his family, protecting, supporting and leading them. The menacing aspect of such power arouses fear among lesser folk, and this might mean only avoidance and rejection, were it not mingled with some degree of admiration. But graciousness and good will generate a desire to pay *homage*, and when this predominates it gives rise to a feeling of *reverence* or *respect*. Where there is a decisive difference in power, reciprocal sentiments of affection and reverence, or, in a lower degree, benevolence and deference, stand as the twin pillars that form the very foundations of *Gemeinschaft*. Because of such feelings a kind of community relationship is possible, even probable, between *master* and *servant*, especially when it is supported and encouraged, as it usually is, by close, continuing and exclusive domestic co-habitation, like the bonds of very close kinship.

6

Community by *blood*, indicating primal unity of existence, develops more specifically into community of *place*, which is expressed first of all as living in close proximity to one another. This in turn becomes community of *spirit*, working together for the same end and purpose. Community of place is what holds life together on a physical level, just as community of spirit is the binding link on the level of conscious thought. The last of

⁹ *die Würde*, used by Tönnies to imply legitimate authority arising out of communal life, as opposed to *Herrschaft* by which he usually (though not always) means 'domination'.

these elements, together with the former two, is what makes a truly human community in its highest form. In the first type of community we share our common physical humanity, in the second we share land held in common, in the last we usually share sacred places or worship the same deities. All three types of community are intimately connected with each other in respect of both place and time, both in particular phenomena and in the whole of human culture and its history. Wherever human beings are bound together in an organic fashion by their inclination and common consent, Community of one kind or another exists. Either the earlier type contains the nucleus of the later one, or the later one will have developed a relative independence from the earlier. We can regard (1) kinship, (2) neighbourhood, and (3) friendship or comradeship, as perfectly intelligible ways of describing those three original types.

(1) *The home* is both the physical location and, so to speak, the living body of *kinship*. Here people live together under the one protecting roof. Here they share the same possessions and enjoy the same good things, especially nourishment from the same supplies and sitting together at the same table. Here the dead are revered as invisible spirits, as if they still had the power to watch over their descendants, so that fear and honour together maintain peaceful co-existence and co-operation more securely. The spirit of kinship is certainly not limited by the walls of the house or by mere physical proximity. Wherever it is strong and lively in the most intimate relationships, it can find its own nourishment, feeding upon past memories and recalling close-knit communal activity, however far it may be from home. In such circumstances we cleave to physical closeness all the more, because only in this way can our longing for love find rest and harmony. The ordinary man, in the long term and for the most part, will feel at his best and happiest when he is surrounded by his family and his own circle. He is at home (*chez soi*).

(2) *Neighbourhood* is the general character of life together in a *village*. The closeness of the dwellings, the common fields, even the way the holdings run alongside each other, cause the people to meet and get used to each other and to develop intimate acquaintance. It becomes necessary to share work, organisation and forms of administration. The gods and spirits of land and water, which confer blessing or threaten disaster, have to be implored for grace and mercy. Although it is basically conditioned by living together, this kind of community can persist even while people are absent from their neighbourhood, but this is more difficult than with kinship; it has to be sustained by fixed habits of getting together and by customs regarded as sacred.

(3) *Friendship* or *comradeship* is formed independently of kinship and neighbourhood, being conditioned by and resulting from similarity of work or opinion. It grows most easily where people share the same or a similar calling or craft. But such a tie must be formed and fostered through easy and frequent meeting, which is most likely to happen within a *town*. The *divinity* thus evoked and worshipped by a common spirit is of major importance for maintaining the bond, since it alone or for the most part is what gives the bond a living, lasting form. Such a *benevolent* spirit is not located in any one place, but dwells in the conscience of its worshippers and accompanies their wanderings in foreign parts. Those who are truly comrades in the faith, knowing one another like members of a craft or professional group, will feel themselves to be united everywhere by a spiritual bond and by working at the same task. Therefore living together in a town can be included in the category of neighbourhood, as can living together in a household, where unrelated persons or servants are involved. On the other hand the comradeship of minds creates a kind of invisible location, a mystical city and meeting-place which comes alive through the medium of artistic sympathy or creative purpose. Relationships between people as friends and comrades have nothing organic, no inner necessity about their character; they owe least to instinct and are less conditioned by habit than are neighbourly relationships; they share a common outlook¹⁰ and thus, in contrast with neighbourliness, seem to rest either on chance or free choice. But a similar gradation of ties has already been shown to exist among relations of pure kinship, and this leads us to set the matter out in the following way.

7

Neighbourhood may be compared to kinship in much the same way as the marriage bond may be compared to the relationship between mother and child. Whereas with mother and child mutual affection is in itself enough to maintain the bond, with married couples – and all relationships based on affinity [rather than consanguinity] – the tie has to be underpinned by living together and shared habits. And likewise, just as relationships between siblings – and hence of cousins and more distant kin – depend on residual organic ties, so friendship also is linked to neighbourhood and kinship. Shared memories generate gratitude and loyalty; the concrete

¹⁰ *Sie sind mentaler Natur.*

reality of such connections must manifest itself in mutual trust and belief in one another. But the basis of such relationships is no longer so spontaneous and self-evident, and each individual is aware of himself and needs to assert himself over and against the others. These relationships are therefore the most difficult to maintain and are least able to cope with disruptions such as the disputes and quarrels that are bound to occur wherever people live together. Continuous proximity and frequency of contact imply not just mutual encouragement and support but also the possibility, indeed probability, of some degree of restriction and negativity; and only as long as the *positive* side predominates can a relationship claim to display genuine community. This explains why many such *fraternities* of a purely intellectual and spiritual kind have found by experience that they can tolerate the physical proximity of actually living together only up to a certain point. It has to be counter-balanced by a high degree of individual freedom.

Within the bonds of kinship all natural authority is summed up in the authority of the *father*. The idea of paternal authority also survives in the office of *prince* or ruler, even where the basis of the relationship is essentially one of neighbourhood. In this case it is determined more by power and might than by age and paternity – as can be seen quite clearly in the influence of a lord over his people, of a squire over his tenants, or of a patron over his clients. Lastly, in the context of comradeship or friendship – in the form of common devotion to the same profession or craft – such fatherly authority will be expressed as that of the *master-craftsman* over his lads, apprentices and pupils.

Authority that comes with *age* is best expressed in the administration of *justice* and the role of the *judge*. Violent deeds, followed by revenge and feuds, arise from the hot temper of youth and all its passions. An older man stands above all this as a dispassionate observer, in no way inclined to promote one person against another out of prejudice or hatred. Instead he will try to ascertain which side started the trouble and whether the provocation was sufficient for a normal, balanced person. He will also decide what a man who has overstepped the mark must do in compensation or how he should be punished.

Authority that derives from *power* must distinguish itself in battle – it legitimates itself through bravery and courage. It is epitomised in the authority of the *feudal leader* or warlord. It is his job to muster the fighting forces, to train them and lead them against the enemy, commanding everything required for the collective effort to ward off disaster

A) the *country* or *kingdom*, B) the *province* or *district*, and C) the *village*, the latter being the most intimate formation of this kind. Partly from the village and partly alongside it the *town*¹⁵ develops, which is held together in its complete form more by a common spirit than by shared natural interests. In its outer form it is no more than a large village – either a collection of neighbouring villages or a walled village. In its next stage the town will rule over the surrounding countryside and thereby establish a new way of organising the province or, in a wider context, the whole country. Thus a people or a tribe is reconstituted in a new or different form. *Inside the town* certain characteristic institutions emerge – such as the craft union, guild or *corporation*, and the fellowship for worship, the fraternity or religious *congregation*, these being the ultimate and highest expression of the idea of Community. A whole town, or a village, or a nation, a tribe, a clan and finally a family can all in the same way be seen and understood as a particular type of guild or religious community. And vice versa – all these many different structures and formations are contained within the idea of the family and all proceed from it as the universal expression of the reality of Community.

II

Community life means *mutual* possession and enjoyment, and possession and enjoyment of goods held *in common*. The motivating force behind possession and enjoyment is the desire to have and to hold. Common goods – common evils; common friends – common enemies. Evils and enemies are not themselves objects of possession and enjoyment, they come from negative, not positive motivation, from animosity and hatred, a common desire to destroy. Coveted objects are not in themselves objects of aggression, but belong to an imagined realm of possession and enjoyment, which may only be attainable by acts of aggression. Possession is intrinsically the desire to keep what you have; it is itself a form of enjoyment, a fulfilment of natural desire, like breathing the air in the atmosphere. This is also true

¹⁵ *die Stadt* can be rendered in English as either town or city. For Tönnies, *die Stadt* clearly has connotations of smallness and *Gemeinschaft*, as distinct from *die Grossstadt* which is a product of *Gesellschaft*. Earlier translators of Tönnies's writings have dealt with the problem by rendering *Stadt* as 'town' and *Grossstadt* as 'city'. But this is misleading because throughout the book Tönnies portrays the highest flowering of *Gemeinschaft* as occurring in the small, self-governing urban centres that political theorists refer to as 'city-states'. In this edition *Stadt* is translated as either town or city according to context, while *Grossstadt* is translated as 'big city'.

for the possession and interest which human beings have in *each other*. Use can differ from possession, in that some kinds of enjoyment depend on destruction of the object possessed, as when an animal is killed in order to be eaten. The hunter and fisherman want to eat rather than to possess their individual prey, although part of their enjoyment may be permanent and therefore count as possession, like the use of pelts or the accumulation of reserves. But hunting as an ongoing activity is dependent on the possession, however vague, of a *hunting ground*; hunting may be regarded as enjoyment of this possession. The general nature and content of this possession must move rational people to preserve or even to increase it, since it forms the 'capital' of which the prey is the product. In the same way the tree is the 'capital' whose fruits are picked, or the soil, which yields edible shoots.

The same quality is assumed by the domesticated animal which is fed and cared for, whether it is going to be used as a servant and helper or to provide parts of its body for consumption. Animals are *bred* with the purpose already described; the species or herd is the permanent, preserved element – the actual possession – while the individual specimen is slaughtered for consumption. The keeping of herds implies a particular relationship to the earth, and to the pasture lands, which provide food for the cattle. But hunting grounds and pasture lands on an open range can be changed when they are exhausted; the people with their belongings and their animals leave their territory to look for a better one. It is only the ploughed field, in which a man sows the seed and reaps the crop with his own labour, that binds his feet. It becomes the possession of succeeding generations, and together with constantly renewed human energies represents an inexhaustible treasure. It gains its full value only gradually through the growth of experience, which produces sensible and careful cultivation. With the cultivated field the dwelling house also becomes fixed. Instead of being movable, like people, animals and things, it becomes immovable like the earth beneath it. Man becomes doubly bound, both by the ploughed field and by the house in which he dwells – in other words, by the works of his own hands.

I2

Community life develops in permanent relation to field and dwelling house. It can be explained only in its own terms, for its inner core and thus to some extent its very existence is part of the nature of things.

Community in general exists among all organic beings, rational human Community among human beings. We make a distinction between animals that live together and those that do not live together, that are social or asocial. That is fine, but we forget that we are dealing only with different degrees and varieties of co-existence – in the way that co-existence among birds of passage differs from that among predatory animals. And we forget that living together is a primal fact of nature; it is isolation, not co-operation, that needs to be explained. This means that *particular* issues will sooner or later bring about division, the dissolution of larger groups into smaller ones; but the larger ones were there *before* the smaller ones, just as growth precedes procreation (which can be seen as a kind of supra-individual growth). Each of these larger groups has the capacity to carry on despite division into the separated parts that form its 'limbs'. In the representative limbs the larger body can still act and exercise influence.

If we then picture a model of development in which a centre or core radiates spokes in different directions, that centre itself signifies the unity of the whole. The whole is held together by force of will, and such will must be particularly powerful in the centre. But along the spokes points for new centres will develop; and the more they require energy to maintain themselves and to expand into their periphery, the more they will draw away from their original core. The latter will necessarily grow weaker and less able to extend its influence in other directions unless it can continue to draw on its original resources. Nevertheless let us assume that living ties of union *are* maintained between the core and the various secondary centres branching off from it. Each of these centres will be represented by a 'self', which can be called the *head* with regard to its members. But as head it is not the whole – though it becomes more like the whole when it collects around itself its subordinate centres in the form of *their* heads. In theory they have *always* been part of the centre from which they are derived, so they are fulfilling their intrinsic purpose when they draw nearer to the centre and gather together in one place. This is essential when circumstances either external or internal require mutual assistance and co-ordinated action. Power and authority will be found here which in some way or another affect the safety and lives of *all*.

In the same way the possession of all property resides ultimately in the whole community and in its central authority, so long as that is thought of as representative of the whole. It is from that central authority that the subsidiary centres derive their holdings and assert their rights over them

SECTION 2

The theory of *Gesellschaft*

19

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