

CLASSIC

CONTEMPORARY

CROSS-CULTURAL

14 Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft

FERDINAND TÖNNIES

The German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) described patterns of change by contrasting two types of social living: Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. In simple terms, Gemeinschaft is rooted in the rural, kinship-based life of the past; Gesellschaft, by contrast, finds its clearest expression in the commercial world of today's large, anonymous cities.

[A] relationship . . . and also the resulting association is conceived of either as real and organic life—this is the essential characteristic of the Gemeinschaft (community); or as imaginary and mechanical structure—this is the concept of Gesellschaft (society). . . .

All intimate, private, and exclusive living together, so we discover, is understood as life in Gemeinschaft (community). Gesellschaft (society) is public life—it is the world itself. In Gemeinschaft with one's family, one lives from birth on, bound to it in weal and woe. One goes into Gesellschaft as one goes into a strange country. A young man is warned against bad Gesellschaft, but the expression bad Gemeinschaft violates the meaning of the word. Lawyers may speak of domestic (*häusliche*) Gesellschaft, thinking only of the legalistic concept of social association; but the domestic Gemeinschaft, or home life with its immeasurable influence upon

the human soul, has been felt by everyone who ever shared it. Likewise, a bride or groom knows that he or she goes into marriage as a complete Gemeinschaft of life (*communio totius vitae*). A Gesellschaft of life would be a contradiction in and of itself. One keeps or enjoys another's Gesellschaft, but not his Gemeinschaft in this sense. One becomes a part of a religious Gemeinschaft; religious Gesellschaften (associations or societies), like any other groups formed for given purposes, exist only in so far as they, viewed from without, take their places among the institutions of a political body or as they represent conceptual elements of a theory; they do not touch upon the religious Gemeinschaft as such. There exists a Gemeinschaft of language, of folkways or mores, or of beliefs; but, by way of contrast, Gesellschaft exists in the realm of business, travel, or sciences. So of special importance are the commercial Gesellschaften; whereas, even though a certain familiarity and Gemeinschaft may exist among business partners, one could indeed hardly speak of commercial Gemeinschaft.

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To make the word combination “joint-stock *Gemeinschaft*” would be abominable. On the other hand, there exists a *Gemeinschaft* of ownership in fields, forest, and pasture. The *Gemeinschaft* of property between man and wife cannot be called *Gesellschaft* of property. Thus many differences become apparent.

Gemeinschaft is old; *Gesellschaft* is new as a name as well as a phenomenon. . . . [S]ays Bluntschli (*Staatwörterbuch IV*), “Wherever urban culture blossoms and bears fruits, *Gesellschaft* appears as its indispensable organ. The rural people know little of it.” On the other hand, all praise of rural life has pointed out that the *Gemeinschaft* among people is stronger there and more alive; it is the lasting and genuine form of living together. In contrast to *Gemeinschaft*, *Gesellschaft* is transitory and superficial. Accordingly, *Gemeinschaft* should be understood as a living organism, *Gesellschaft* as a mechanical aggregate and artifact. . . .

The *Gemeinschaft* by blood, denoting unity of being, is developed and differentiated into *Gemeinschaft* of locality, which is based on a common habitat. A further differentiation leads to the *Gemeinschaft* of mind, which implies only cooperation and coordinated action for a common goal. *Gemeinschaft* of locality may be conceived as a community of physical life, just as *Gemeinschaft* of mind expresses the community of mental life. In conjunction with the others, this last type of *Gemeinschaft* represents the truly human and supreme form of community. Kinship *Gemeinschaft* signifies a common relation to, and share in, human beings themselves, while in *Gemeinschaft* of locality such a common relation is established through collective ownership of land; and, in *Gemeinschaft* of mind, the common bond is represented by sacred places and worshiped deities. All three types of *Gemeinschaft* are closely interrelated in space as well as in time. They are, therefore, also related in all such single phenomena and in their development, as well as in general human culture and its history.

Wherever human beings are related through their wills in an organic manner and affirm each other, we find one or another of the three types of *Gemeinschaft*. Either the earlier type involves the later one, or the later type has developed to relative independence from some earlier one. It is, therefore, possible to deal with (1) kinship, (2) neighborhood, and (3) friendship as definite and meaningful derivations of these original categories. . . .

The theory of the *Gesellschaft* deals with the artificial construction of an aggregate of human beings which superficially resembles the *Gemeinschaft* in so far as the individuals live and dwell together peacefully. However, in the *Gemeinschaft* they remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors, whereas in the *Gesellschaft* they are essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors. In the *Gesellschaft*, as contrasted with the *Gemeinschaft*, we find no actions that can be derived from a priori and necessarily existing unity; no actions, therefore, which manifest the will and the spirit of the unity even if performed by the individual; no actions which, in so far as they are performed by the individual, take place on behalf of those united with him. In the *Gesellschaft* such actions do not exist. On the contrary, here everybody is by himself and isolated, and there exists a condition of tension against all others. Their spheres of activity and power are sharply separated, so that everybody refuses to everyone else contact with and admittance to his sphere; i.e., intrusions are regarded as hostile acts. Such a negative attitude toward one another becomes the normal and always underlying relation of these power-endowed individuals, and it characterizes the *Gesellschaft* in the condition of rest; nobody wants to grant and produce anything for another individual, nor will he be inclined to give ungrudgingly to another individual, if it be not in exchange for a gift or labor equivalent that he considers at least equal to what he has given. . . .

. . . In *Gesellschaft* every person strives for that which is to his own advantage and he affirms the actions of others only in so far as and as long as they can further his interest. Before and outside of convention and also before and outside of each special contract, the relation of all to all may therefore be conceived as potential hostility or latent war. Against this condition, all agreements of the will stand out as so many treaties and peace pacts. This conception is the only one which does justice to all facts of business and trade where all rights and duties can be reduced to mere value and definitions of ability to deliver. Every theory of pure private law or law of nature understood as

pertaining to the *Gesellschaft* has to be considered as being based upon this conception.

CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Describe the essential features of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* in order to clearly distinguish the two organizational types.
2. Why does Tönnies link *Gemeinschaft* to kinship, neighborhood, and friendship? How is *Gesellschaft* linked to commerce?
3. Based on reading this selection, do you think Tönnies found one type of social organization preferable to the other? If so, which one? Why?