

## Ferdinand Toennies (1855-1936)



Ferdinand Toennies was born in Germany in Schleswig-Holstein. His early years were spent first on a well-to-do farm and later in a small-town. His mother's devoutly Lutheran family included a number of clergy. Although Toennies would come to be considered an agnostic by most believers, he grew before his death to believe in a universal religious faith that would reconcile the divisions that plagued humankind.

Some would no doubt characterize Toennies's early experiences as provincial. He developed a pastoral *Weltanschauung*, complete with the patriotism that often follows when the loyalties to tradition and the small community are projected to the broader concerns of the nation. *He was the product of a distinctive form of social life that left an abiding sense of integration: in nature, in the interaction of people, in the ways of culture, and ultimately in all social life.*

Despite extensive travel, Toennies lived his entire life in the region of his birth. But his sojourns to various universities and the cosmopolitan capitals of Europe juxtaposed urban and rural life and the contrasting forms of solidarity represented by each.

### **History and Biography**

In the wider sphere of social life, a number of forces were at play. The population of Germany grew rapidly from some 40 million in 1871 to over 65 million on the eve of the First World War. During this era, the German colonial empire was expanding as was its navy, while the army was among the most powerful of the world. It was within this context of the Bismarckian attempt to unify through the sword, of industrialization and population growth, and of a growing external empire that Ferdinand Toennies wrote of the social origins of solidarity and the Hobbesian problem of order.

### **Assumptions**

The political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes left an indelible mark on the work of Toennies. Yet that mark is both subtle and complex. On the one hand, Toennies held that the integration of modern industrial societies depends in large measure on the power of Hobbes's political commonwealth. On the other, he argued that an earlier form of society was united by means of a naturally occurring organicism that subjected individual wills to that of the group. As we shall see, the conception of will is crucial to the thought of Ferdinand Toennies. And although he approached this subject from the vantage point of the ideal type, *will was for this theorist a real force, not an abstraction.* Toennies has emerged as something of a romantic, drawn to an earlier, more pastoral conception of social life based on a more congenial type of human nature. However, it was the evolution toward the "reasonable" and "individualistic"

side of will, with its expression in the impersonal bonds of industrial society, that shaped his theoretical sociology.

Toennies's assumptions about the discipline followed the positive conception of science that prevailed in his day. He divided sociology into three distinctive areas: (1) a pure form consisting of central conceptions that form an integral system, (2) an "applied" form in which pure theory is used deductively to explain societal development, and (3) an empirically based approach to social research. Throughout *Community and Society*, he moved back and forth from theoretical conceptualization to the findings of social research.

#### Theoretical Content

The more significant writings of Ferdinand Toennies emerged during his youth and in many respects detailed the decline of an old order and the rise of a new one. The analysis that follows is based on the classic he wrote in response to such conditions, *Community and Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*. As we shall see, he preferred the more binding social relationships of traditional society. His work has endured, however, because it moves beyond romantic nostalgia. *It reflects in a striking fashion the great division between folk and urban society; between the intimate relationships of family, kin, and community and the impersonal alliances born of modern polity, economic exchange, and state power.* This portrayal of two worlds of human existence still strikes a responsive chord.

In this system of social thought, social reality consists of various social entities existing at different levels of abstraction. These include the *interpersonal relationship*, the *corporate groups* that act through representatives (such as officers), and the broad *collectivities* that transcend and subsume lower level groups and relationships (such as nations and classes). All such entities, and the forms they assume, are the product of differing manifestations of human will.

The conception of will in the thought of Toennies is both central and difficult. In a general sense, it refers to voluntary dimensions analyzed by Toennies through the prism of a Weberian ideal type. The *Wesenville*, or *natural will*, drives those actions that are engaged in for their intrinsic worth or their own sake. It is the basis for unconditional emotional bonding and a reverence for tradition. The *Kurville* refers to the human propensity toward a reasoned selection among alternatives. Thus, the action of *rational choice* is willed because it is instrumental in achieving ends.

These types of will are expressed in two contrasting forms of social life. The foundation of the *Gemeinschaft* or "community" is the *Wesenville*. Conceptualized at the societal level, the *Gemeinschaft* consists of social relationships of an intimate or primary sort, such as those of family, club, or religious order. Predictably, the type of law that prevails in such an order will be that based on the informal codes of family and kin, and social control will be left to consensus, custom, and religious precept. Wealth is centered in the land, the individual is subordinate to the collectivity, and the central institutions are those of the family, small village, and town. Remember that the relationships, sentiments, and rules of the *Gemeinschaft* are willed for their own sake.

However, given the momentous changes of his era, Toennies acknowledged the ascension of the *Gesellschaft*. The creation of the rational will, "society," *represents the more impersonal means-to-an-end forms of social relationships*. These are marked by the purposes of exchange and reasoned calculation. At the group level, *Gesellschaft* relationships are exemplified in business or professional associations. At the societal level, the state and the

economy of industrial capitalism supplant the centrality of the family, kin, and village. *Law is a matter of formal contracts, both civil and criminal, secured by legislation and specifying the rights and responsibilities of individuals to individuals and members to the commonwealth.* Public opinion and the conventional wisdom replaces heritage, articles of faith, and "natural" consensus as informal means of social control.

Within the *Gemeinschaft* form of social order, a *homogeneity of view*, the ties of kinship, a common language, and a sense of place are the basis for an organic unity. Alliances are based on closeness and mutual aid, while authority is personal and often paternalistic. Authority is commonly fixed in the elder, the master, the patriarch. For the *Gesellschaft*, *the identity born of community surrenders to the anonymity of mass society.* The emerging industrial order within its burgeoning cities and centralized power is held in one piece by artificial bonds. Such bonds tend to be more malleable; they come and go, disintegrate and reform as the needs of the state, bureaucracy, business, or workplace change. Here, social relationships are based on special needs, class interests, and personal ambition. The connectedness of society is a matter of interlocking positions of status. *This formal structure supplants the more natural coming-together of like-minded persons who gain emotional sustenance from sharing a common moral universe.*

*Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, for Toennies, represented more than differences in social relationships or societies. *They were also separate poles on a continuum of change.* Yet this inevitable evolution with its industrialism, its commonwealth, and its population redistribution could not help but tear the fabric of human relations. Within his era, Toennies witnessed the cutting off of goods and services from the common production of community where members were bound by common purpose. Rather, economic exchange became a function of the impersonal market. And with the rise of a multiplicity of "publics" in the *heterogeneous social order*, the threat to equilibrium was self-evident.

## References

Toennies, Ferdinand. [1887] 1963. *Community and Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*. Translated and edited by Charles P. Loomis. New York: Harper & Row.

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