



GEMEINSCHAFT AND GESELLSCHAFT

FERDINAND TÖNNIES (1855–1936)

IN CONTEXT

FOCUS

Community and society

KEY DATES

1651 English philosopher Thomas Hobbes describes the relationship between man's nature and the structure of society in *Leviathan*.

1848 In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels lay out the effects of capitalism on society.

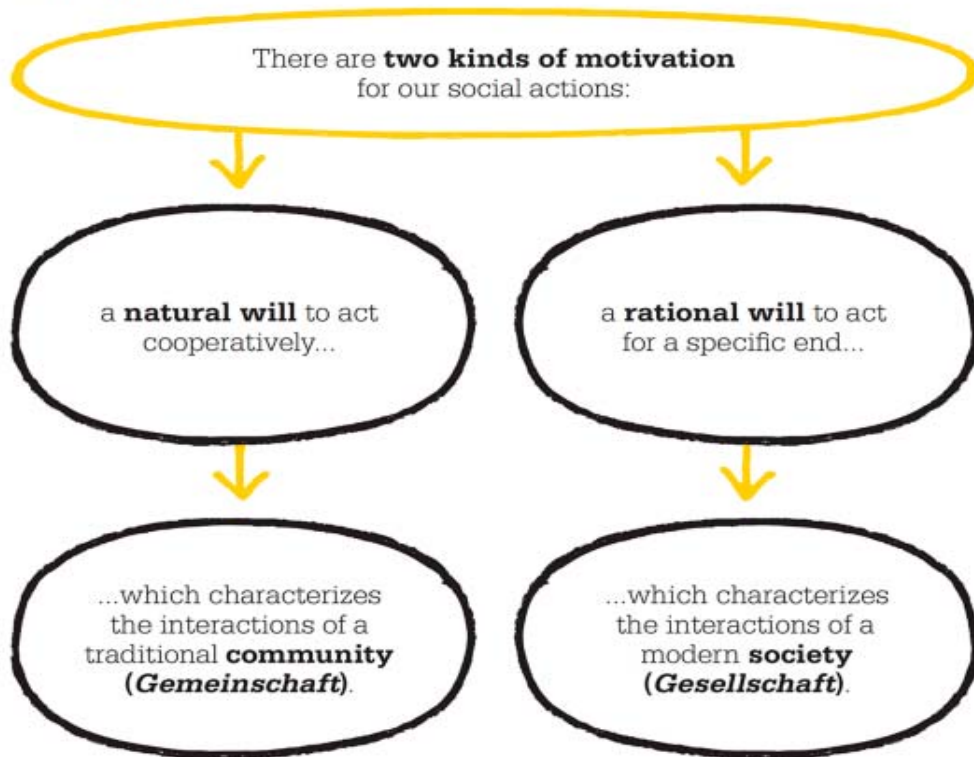
1893 Sociologist Émile Durkheim outlines the idea of social order maintained by organic and mechanical solidarity in *The Division of Labor in Society*.

1904–05 Max Weber publishes *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

2000 Zygmunt Bauman introduces the idea of “liquid modernity” in an increasingly globalized society.

Toward the end of the 19th century, a number of thinkers turned their attention to the social implications of modernity, and in particular the growth of capitalist industrial society. Among them were Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Ferdinand Tönnies, widely regarded as founding fathers of sociology. Tönnies' major contribution to the discipline was his analysis of contrasting types of social groupings in his influential *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, published in 1887. In this book, his magnum opus, Tönnies points out what he sees as the distinction between traditional rural communities and modern industrialized society. The former, he argues, are characterized by *Gemeinschaft*, community that is based on

the bonds of family and social groups such as the church. Small-scale communities tend to have common goals and beliefs, and interactions within them are based on trust and cooperation.



Triumph of “will”

In large-scale societies such as modern cities, the division of labor and mobility of the workforce have eroded traditional bonds. In place of *Gemeinschaft* there is *Gesellschaft*, association or society. Relationships in such societies are more impersonal and superficial, and based on individual self-interest rather than mutual aid.

The two extremes of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* exist to a greater or lesser extent in every social grouping, but Tönnies argued that the ethos of capitalism and competition had led to a predominance of mere association in the industrial society in which he lived.

At the root of Tönnies' theory was his idea of “will”—what motivates people to action. He distinguished between what he called *Wesenwille*, “natural will,” and *Kürwille*, “rational will.” *Wesenwille*, he said, is the instinctive will to do something for its own sake, or out of habit or custom, or

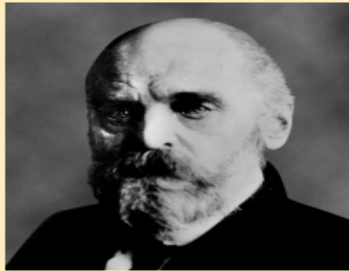
moral obligation. This is the motivation that underlies the social order of *Gemeinschaft*, the will to do things for and as a part of the community. On the other hand, *Kürwille* motivates us to act in a purely rational way to achieve a specific goal, and is the type of will behind decisions made in large organizations, and particularly businesses. It is *Kürwille* that characterizes the *Gesellschaft* of capitalist urban society.

Despite his Left-leaning politics, Tönnies was seen as an essentially conservative figure, lamenting modernity's loss of *Gemeinschaft*, rather than advocating social change. Although he had gained the respect of fellow sociologists, his ideas had little influence until many years later. Tönnies' theory, along with his work on methodology, paved the way for 20th-century sociology. Weber further developed Tönnies' notions of will and motivation to social action, and Durkheim's idea of mechanical and organic solidarity echoed the contrast between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.

"*Gemeinschaft* by its very essence is of an earlier origin than its subject or members."

Ferdinand Tönnies

FERDINAND TÖNNIES



Ferdinand Tönnies was born in North Frisia, Schleswig (now Nordfriesland, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany). After studying at the universities of Strassburg, Jena, Bonn,

and Leipzig, he was awarded his doctorate at Tübingen in 1877.

In his postdoctoral studies in Berlin and London, Tönnies' interest shifted from philosophy to political and social issues. He became a private tutor at the University of Kiel in 1881, but an inheritance allowed him to focus on his own work. He was also a cofounder of the German Sociological Society. Because of his outspoken political views, he was not offered a professorship at Kiel until 1913. His Social Democratic sympathies and a public denunciation of Nazism led to his removal from the university in 1931, three years before his death at age 80.

Key works

1887 *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*

1926 *Progress and Social Development*

1931 *Introduction to Sociology*