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Christopher Adair-Totef: Reintroducing Ferdinand Tönnies, Routledge, London; New York 2023

Niall Bond¹

Christopher Adair-Totef's *Reintroducing Ferdinand Tönnies* is a welcome contribution to a growing library of secondary literature on Tönnies, who was known principally as one of the founders of the sociological classics in Germany, alongside Max Weber and Georg Simmel. Tönnies' work, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* of 1887, appeared a few years prior to the first contributions to the field by Simmel and Weber. *Reintroducing* is a tribute to Tönnies by an author with a broad overview of Tönnies' vita and writings. Before discussing the work, it is useful to situate the part Tönnies played in the science and society.²

Tönnies' contribution to thought on human relations and social structures reflects his position in the German tradition of *Nationalökonomie* prior to the emergence of sociology as a discipline. The passion behind his work stems from his resistance to the Hobbesian idea that all action is derived from individuals' desires to guarantee their own individual comfort and prosperity and to the idea of Classical economics that the overriding traction spring of human action is self-interest. Tönnies' moral impetus is his feeling, harking back through Romanticism to Kant's principle of humanity and anticipating later critiques of instrumental reason and capitalism through to Habermas and beyond, that human beings should not be used in the pursuit of ulterior motives. Tönnies' work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, for which the best translation is neither *Community and Association* (Loomis 1955/1974) nor *Community and Civil Society* (Harris and Hollis 2001), but *Community and Society*, was first published in 1887, inducing Emile Durkheim to draft *De la division du travail social* as a contradiction to Tönnies: while Tönnies' social theory focuses on motives or *inner attitudes* towards other human beings in social relationships and structures, Durkheim reverts to the argument that sociability was best ensured through the mutually beneficial *heterogeneity of functions* advanced during the Scottish Enlightenment. Durkheim's description of Tönnies' work as "ideological" clarifies how much the conceptions of society by early modern sociologists constituted subjective responses to modernism. The subjectivity of their views does not, however, detract from the objective interest their concepts offer in intersubjective discussions.

Simmel and Weber were clearly inspired by Tönnies – Georg Simmel in his exploration of the quantitative determination of social groups and Max Weber in his definition of social relationships based upon a feeling of appurtenance (*Vergemeinschaftung*) or purposive rationality (*Vergesellschaftung*) as well as other conceptual dichotomies such as that of the church and the sect. And yet there is a generational difference between Tönnies and Simmel and Weber, which can be attributed to Nietzschean radical individualism and perspectivism adopted by Simmel and Weber (a point Adair-Totef alludes to but does not develop), but also by their subscription to epistemological positions of Wilhelm Dilthey, for whom the purpose

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2 Cf. Niall Bond (2013), *Understanding Ferdinand Tönnies' Community and Society: Social Theory and Political Philosophy Between Enlightened Liberal Individualism and Transfigured Community*, Münster: Lit Verlag.

of the human sciences was to understand the meaning of individuals' (or individual groups') actions, and Heinrich Rickert, who precluded deducing general trends of social development from the heterogeneous continuum of reality.

In contradistinction, Tönnies, whose social theory is part of a tradition of philosophies of history that seek out the trajectory of “society” as astronomers follow the movement of the stars, asserts a unilinear development from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. In his thought, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* are respectively premodern-bucolic common ownership and an amalgamation of capitalism and modern state socialism, whence the original subtitle – “Communism and Socialism as empirical forms of culture”. (His insistence upon the “empirical” or real existence of “communism” lies in his conviction that while “communism” was in his age dismissed as utopian, something he referred to as “communist” – the reliance of human interactions on non-individualist attitudes – had pre-existed modern capitalism.) A further fault line between Tönnies and his colleagues was his approach to the fact/ value dichotomy, notwithstanding the advocating of value neutrality by all three: while acknowledging his preference for *Gemeinschaft* in private, Tönnies publicly accepted the inevitable ascension of *Gesellschaft*. In fact, his conceptions of community and society delimit *normative orders*, the former based on the injunction that humans should never be regarded as solely means to an end, the latter based on the pragmatic but spurious conviction that humans can only be precisely that.

Above all, political understandings of the community-society dichotomy explain the ambivalent reception of Tönnies' difficult work after World War II, particularly in Germany. During the era of National Socialism, the term *Völksgemeinschaft* had become the rallying call for nationalist extremists, with jurists taking up the call for folk community to justify stripping ethnic and other minorities of the fundamental rights of liberal democracies and the rule of law. Tönnies was a vociferous and courageous opponent of the National Socialist movement and its interpretation of the term *Gemeinschaft*, which however had become central within German culture for evoking the sense of belonging to a country which was a latecomer as a nation state. And yet Tönnies spent most of his professional life on the margins of academia, primarily because of his association with the Marxist left. It may be no coincidence that shortly after being appointed to a chair in 1909 and rising to national fame, Tönnies was enlisted as a propagandist for Germany in WWI. But towards the end of the Weimar Republic, he became a professed opponent to National Socialism at a high personal cost. It is against the background of the political reception of concepts designed for critical social analysis that Tönnies' reception can best be understood, notably in Germany, making the need for a reintroduction of Tönnies in global discussions on science and society clear. His obscurity was due not just to his obfuscating style but also to an act of collective repression.

An even brief introduction to Ferdinand Tönnies should offer the above overview, but also consider the political history of community and specifically the community-society dichotomy. While community is delimited by largely *political* boundaries, society in Tönnies' thought is as a largely *economic* notion, permeable and boundless in scope, as extensive as the imagination of culturally untrammelled agents seeking their advantage in a universe of acquisitive individualist wills. As Tönnies foresaw, the dichotomy proved influential and was in Tönnies' assessment deeper than the distinction between Civil Society and the State developed by Hegel and Lorenz von Stein. The sway of political communitarianism was stark during the twentieth century: while the signifier communism was used to justify the repression of liberal rights in polities with Marxist legitimacies, the term “community” was branded by

Third Way prophets dismissing both capitalism and socialism from the nineteen-thirties by Nazis and fascists in France. While in Nazi Germany, Tönnies had become a *persona non grata* due to his refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Nazi use of *Gemeinschaft*, in occupied France the Vichy intelligentsia, perhaps unaware of this, referenced Tönnies in their own Third Way ideology centring around an economic community of work for all. Antonin Cohen has shown³ the role of the Jewish economist Pierre Uri, influenced by Tönnies, in steering thought on the “*communauté*” from the nationalist “revolution” of Vichy to European federalism. Uri, who had liberally appealed for a plurality of community appurtenances during the Vichy regime, became one of Jean Monnet’s chief advisors after the war. Tönnies’ definition of community – Unity in Plurality – underwent a liberal allophiliac transformation when the motto of European integration was announced: united in diversity.

This wordy preface to a comment on Adair-Totéff’s work is in my opinion essential to grasp a present-day interest in reexploring Tönnies’ thought. While Tönnies’ position in science and society does not emerge quite so clearly from Adair-Totéff’s reintroduction, the book is interesting for Tönnies scholarship. We can see how Tönnies drew a vast tableau contrasting rationalism with historicism, drawing from English natural law, (largely Scottish) Enlightenment, classical economics, and utilitarianism to sketch out his understanding of *Gesellschaft*, and mysticism, the psychology of Arthur Schopenhauer, the moral doctrine of Kant (without however acknowledging as much), and above all (largely German) Romanticism to grasp what he calls *Gemeinschaft*. The legal sources – in the British tradition Henry Sumner Maine, in the German the strikingly contrasted Rudolf von Jhering (for civil society) and Otto von Gierke (for community) – would have merited more development. Of course, a work of 126 pages cannot be expected to treat the subject exhaustively. Still, there was no need to treat what Tönnies regarded as the essentials of his thought so succinctly.

The principal strength of this book therefore lies not in its status as an introduction to Tönnies, but in its comments on work outside *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* upon which Adair-Totéff has chosen to focus attention – for instance his presentation of Tönnies’ book *Custom or Die Sitte* and his efforts on behalf of the German Sociological Association or *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* in chapter 4. In his exploration of *Die Sitte*, Adair-Totéff explores the impact of language on our understanding of social constructs: whereas the German term, *Sitte*, sometimes translated as custom, recalls the word *Sittlichkeit* or morality, the term *Brauch*, sometimes translated as folkway, refers merely to a practice that has been established in a (usually ethnically defined) group of people. In the second part of the fourth chapter, Adair-Totéff retraces the themes and the scientific personalities of the DGS prior and subsequent to WWI. It would have been interesting to contemplate from our present, post-disciplinary vantage how Tönnies envisaged the place of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, the pre-disciplinary work of 1887, and how he saw the disciplinary breakdown of sociology and its fits into the human sciences as a whole as the disciplines evolved in the early twentieth century.

An aspect of this *Reintroduction* that detracts from its impact is the author’s desire to defend Tönnies on views which have since been discredited. Given his objective contributions to the social sciences, Tönnies is beyond the “cancelling” that has become fashionable in parts of academia. Yet for Adair-Totéff, Tönnies could do no wrong, for instance when Adair-Totéff accepts at face value Uwe Carsten’s reassurance that Tönnies’ writings during WWI did not

3 Cohen, Antonin (2012): *De Vichy à la communauté européenne*. Paris: Presses Univ. de France.

constitute propaganda (p. 4). In fact, the Reich funded Tönnies as a propagandist. (Tönnies' description of England as a *Gesellschaft* and Germany as a *Gemeinschaft* in *The German and the English State* was nationalist propaganda and did not bode well for the critical use of his terms.) It is time to drop the posture that from a modern cosmopolitan, inclusive and feminist vantage, Tönnies could only have held opinions now regarded as progressive. This obscures his real influence. I reckon Tönnies' standards of probity would have made him wish to be understood for his actual positions against their historic background. His portentous conceptual apparatus and his academic role inside and outside the University have made his writings an integral part of the curricula.

Occasional factual inaccuracies, such as confusing the Second Empire and the Weimar Republic (p. 98, fn. 1) might be rectified in future editions. If as an introduction, the book does not offer the succinct, sweeping overview that the literature might have afforded, it brings into the discussion aspects of Tönnies which in English-language publications have been overlooked. For that reason, it is a worthwhile addition to literature on Tönnies.

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