21.2D: Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft

*Gemeinschaft* describes groups in which the community takes precedence over the individual; *gesellschaft* prioritizes the individual.

**Learning Objectives**

- Examine the similarities and differences between Ferdinand Tonnies’s concepts of gemeinschaft and gesellschaft in relation to human interactions in society

**Key Points**

- *Gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, which can be generally translated as "community" and "society" respectively, are two sociological categories introduced by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies.
- *Gemeinschaft* describes groups in which the members attach as much, if not more, importance to the groups itself as they do to their own needs. *Gemeinschaft* can be based on shared space and beliefs, as well as kinship. *Gemeinschaft* is characterized by ascribed status.
- *Gesellschaft* refers to groups in which associations never take precedence over the interests of the individual.
- *Gesellschaft*, unlike *gemeinschaft*, places more emphasis on secondary relationships rather than familial or community bonds, and it entails achieved, rather than ascribed, status.
- A normal type is a purely conceptual tool that makes use of logic and deduction, as opposed to Max Weber ‘s ideal type, which is a framework used to understand reality that draws on elements from history and society.
Key Terms

- **ideal type**: An ideal type is not a particular person or thing that exists in the world, but an extreme form of a concept used by sociologists in theories. For example, although there is not a perfectly "modern" society, the term "modern" is used as an ideal type in certain theories to make large-scale points.

- **normal type**: A normal type is a purely conceptual tool that makes use of logic and deduction, as opposed to Max Weber's ideal type, which is a framework used to understand reality that draws on elements from history and society.

- **community**: A group sharing a common understanding and often the same language, manners, tradition and law. See civilization.

Gemeinschaft and gesellschaft are sociological categories for two normal types of human association introduced by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies. A normal type, as coined by Tönnies, is a purely conceptual tool to be built up logically, whereas an ideal type, as coined by Max Weber, is a concept formed by accentuating main elements of a historic/social process. Tönnies’ 1887 book *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* sparked a major revival of corporatist thinking, including an increase in the support for guild socialism, and caused major changes in the field of sociology.

**Gemeinschaft**

*Gemeinschaft* (often translated as community) is a group in which individuals take into account the needs and interests of the group as much as, if not more than, their own self interest. Furthermore, individuals in *gemeinschaft* are regulated by common mores, or beliefs, about the appropriate behavior and responsibilities of members with respect to each other and to the group at large.

*Gemeinschaft* is thus marked by “unity of will.” Tönnies saw the family as the most perfect expression of *gemeinschaft*; however, he expected that *gemeinschaft* could be based on shared place and shared belief as well as kinship, and he included globally dispersed religious communities as possible examples of *gemeinschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* involves ascribed status, which refers to cases in which an individual is assigned a particular status at birth. For example, an individual born to a farmer will come to occupy the parent’s role for the rest of his or her life.

*Gemeinschaften* are broadly characterized by a moderate division of labour, strong personal relationships, strong families, and relatively simple social institutions. In such communities there is seldom a need to enforce social control externally, due to a collective sense of loyalty individuals feel for society.

**Gesellschaft**

In contrast, *gesellschaft* (often translated as society, civil society or association) describes associations in which, for the individual, the larger association never takes precedence over the individual’s self interest, and these associations lack the same level of shared mores. *Gesellschaft* is maintained through individuals acting in their own self interest. A modern business is a good example of *gesellschaft*: the workers, managers, and owners may have very little in terms of shared orientations or beliefs—they may not care deeply for the product they are making—but it is in all their self interest to come to work to make money, and thus the business continues. *Gesellschaft* society involves achieved status where people reach their status through their education and work.

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Unlike *gemeinschaften*, *gesellschaften* emphasize secondary relationships rather than familial or community ties, and there is generally less individual loyalty to society. Social cohesion in *gesellschaften* typically derives from a more elaborate division of labor. An example of *gemeinschaft* in the world today would be an Amish community. The United States would be considered a *gesellschaft* society. Such societies are considered more susceptible to class conflict as well as racial and ethnic conflicts. The social upheavals during the Reconstruction era of the United States complicated the sociological category of *gemeinschaft* because former slaves, whose kinship ties were complicated under slavery, forged new communities that shared aspects of both *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*.

Talcott Parsons considered *gemeinschaft* to represent a community of fate, whose members share both good and bad fortune, as opposed to the pursuit of rational self-interest that characterized *gesellschaft*.

Eric Hobsbawm has argued that as globalisation turns the entire planet into an increasingly remote kind of *gesellschaft*, similarly collective identity politics seek a factitious remaking of the qualities of *gemeinschaft* by reforging artificial group bonds and identities.

Fredric Jameson highlights the ambivalent envy felt by members of *gesellschaft* for remaining enclaves of *gemeinschaft*, even as the former inevitably corrode the existence of the latter.