

## The Critique of Modern Urban Society: Ferdinand Toennies

### INTRODUCTION

Certainly one of the most profound analyses and critiques of modern urban society is to be found in the work of the German sociologist Ferdinand Toennies. So powerful was the break between pre-industrial rural society and the modern urban world portrayed by Toennies that the terms he employed to denote these two separate states of human experience, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, have become part of the language of classical urban sociology. Despite the obscurity of his original work, Toennies's penetrating account of the loss of community experienced in nineteenth-century metropolitan life was to be a work of profound and lasting importance. Unlike the work of Marx and Engels, which viewed the city as the locus for the fulfilment of their dream of a socialist society, Toennies had a much more pessimistic analysis of the urban condition. Yet, like Marx and Engels, he too had a dream of a co-operative community that could be reconstituted in modern urban life, if only the proper moral sensibility could be cultivated among the masses. Indeed, he ultimately relied upon a synthesis of the Marxian analysis of the dynamic of capitalism and proletarian class consciousness with his own theory of moral education, enlightenment, and evolutionary development as a model for recreating the *Gemeinschaft* of his youth amid the wreckage of industrial society.

For a period of time after the publication of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Toennies joined a local Schleswig workers' association and participated in worker benevolent activities in the hope of applying his ideas directly. He later participated in the Society for Ethical Culture with the same objective in mind. By the end of the nineteenth century, Toennies was well known to the Prussian authorities as a militant social democrat and trade union supporter.<sup>1</sup>

Most of what Toennies discussed in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* was concerned with the detailed differences between these two archetypical states of experience. Toennies's motivation was strongly political in nature. Toennies was born in 1855 in Oldenswort, Eiderstedt, in a relatively remote rural part of northern Germany, in the duchy of Schleswig north of Hamburg. He was educated to the level of high school in the small town of Husum, whose population was less than five thousand. He then came to intellectual maturity, first as a student, and then as a teacher,

in the industrialized metropolises of northern and central Germany. If one consults a map of Germany and follows Toennies's trek between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one from the comfort of his home village in northern Germany to the cities where he attended university—Strasbourg, Jena, Leipzig, Bonn, and finally Berlin, whose population was then about 400,000—it is not difficult to imagine the impact his journey would have had upon him.<sup>2</sup>

It was the severity of the jolt he experienced in his break from the warmth and protective shelter of his community and his exposure to the atomized world of nascent capitalism that stimulated the development of his theoretical ideas. His pessimistic reading of nineteenth-century modernity was reinforced by the general alienation that progressive German intellectuals felt from the late-nineteenth-century authoritarian German state.<sup>3</sup> Toennies also was strongly influenced by the work of Thomas Hobbes as well as that of Marx and Rousseau.<sup>4</sup> In the face of the repression of radicalism by the German authorities and the impoverishment of life in the great cities of imperial Germany that Toennies had witnessed, his theoretical position is not surprising. In this sense the relationship between his personal life biography, his times, and his theoretical position is quite consistent.

While Toennies concentrated upon the general alienation of modern society in the late nineteenth century, his basic argument was cast in terms that contrasted the nature of modern metropolitan life with that of the pre-metropolitan era. In order to understand what it was about modernity and the metropolis that Toennies abhorred, it is necessary to explore in some detail his conceptualization of the two contrasting states of existence. In the process of doing so, it will become clear how important his argument is for any theory of social change, such as that of Marx, for example, that is rooted in the urban experience. At the same time, the nature of Toennies's dream of a co-operative community that might transcend the atomization of daily life in the metropolis is strikingly similar to that of Marx and Engels. To the extent that Toennies's portrait of the urban experience has contemporary relevance, it also has implications for urban public policy, for many of the problems of modern cities revolve around the often illusory search for a sense of community with which to bind individual residents. As will be shown in this book, problems of crime, transportation, environment, and housing all can be linked to the problem of community.

What is the vision of metropolitan society that this melancholy theorist of late-nineteenth-century northern Germany created in his encounter with the world of modernity? Some interpreters have mistakenly read Toennies as having had a nostalgia for a rural way of life that never truly existed. But Toennies himself specifically denied this in a number of places in his writings.

Rather, he was interested in using reason to "look back from the level [man] had achieved and endeavour to find a way out of 'the vagaries of evil in which our species through its own guilt has gotten itself entangled'—in other words to overcome reason by better reasoning." That is, he wished like many of the German philosophers who came before him "to advance beyond Enlightenment instead of abandoning its achievements."<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, when the Nazis played upon *Gemeinschaft*-like sentiments in their sweep to power in later years, Toennies disassociated himself and his work from this form of perverse anti-modernism. Nevertheless, Toennies's writings definitely were highly critical of modern trends in the industrial city. His vision of an alternative to the destruction of community that he witnessed lay in his dream of a social movement dedicated to justice, social equality, and co-operative solidarity that would "in a new age of Enlightenment" reconstruct society on a new moral basis.<sup>6</sup> Thus, for Toennies no less than for Marx and Engels, the city was a place for dreams, but only if the nightmare of the present order could be left behind.

#### GEMEINSCHAFT AND GESELLSCHAFT: FROM COMMUNITY TO ESTRANGEMENT

Toennies published *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* in 1887, but he began work on it as early as 1879. The first edition of the work referred in the subtitle to communism and socialism as empirical forms of culture.<sup>7</sup> The title of the work, which has been translated as "Community and Society," contained the essence of Toennies's argument. Through the use of these two dichotomous concepts, which were intended as ideal types, Toennies attempts to explain how profoundly social relations and individual psyches have been affected by the transcendence of rural pre-capitalist society by urban industrial capitalist society.

The first edition of Toennies's work sold fewer than five hundred copies. For most of his life Toennies received little academic recognition, managing to obtain a proper full academic position only late in life. In a very real sense he was for most of his life a marginal man.

It is intriguing that of all the principal theorists on urbanization and alienation considered here, a significant number never received the academic respectability and honour during their lifetime that their work deserved, or if they did, they did so only very late in their life. Among these, Toennies, Simmel, Marx, and Benjamin were largely neglected by their contemporaries, had difficulty getting academic work, and remained underground or less than respectable writers whose fame generally arose either later in life or after death.

In the case of Marx, Benjamin, and Toennies, their political radicalism and failure to conform to then prevailing scholarly norms explains

their lack of recognition. In the case of Simmel, his unwillingness to abide by the academic rules of specialization and his penchant for philosophical speculation mixed with acute sociological observation was held against him. In the case of Simmel and Benjamin, the fact that they were Jewish was an additional, very important barrier. As well, as the play and film *Amadeus* shows so brilliantly, mediocrites will always attempt to frustrate creative people because of their own jealousy and resentment. Whatever the explanation, the academics and contemporaries who spurned them are now long happily forgotten, while these truly creative artists of social theory achieved fame, albeit late in life or posthumously. It is small compensation, but in this sense their work resembles that of the neglected artist. Perhaps because it was written on the margins of existential being, at no inconsiderable cost to themselves, that this is also why much of it has come to be of lasting value. This is a point I cannot pursue here, but it raises important questions about the creative process and epistemology and, in particular, the role of the "outsider" or marginal person as an insightful observer of social reality. In this respect it is interesting to note that a majority of the writers I consider were either of partial Jewish background—Marx and Adorno (in the case of Marx his Jewish lineage is traceable to his father who converted to Christianity)—or Jewish—Durkheim, Simmel, Lukács, Benjamin, and Horkheimer.<sup>8</sup>

While Toennies may be accused of romanticizing certain aspects of pre-capitalist society, a more important consideration is *what* motivated him to do so. His quest for a society different from the one he witnessed emerging all around him was shared by many nineteenth-century writers. Toennies, like Hegel and Marx, was clearly disturbed by what he perceived to be the alienated and atomized nature of an increasingly urbanized society.<sup>9</sup> In his work, therefore, he sought to identify the basis upon which this atomized state might be transcended and community created anew.

However much we may quarrel with the historical accuracy of Toennies's ideal types, the contrasts that *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* pose are highly suggestive of the complex nature of modern urban society. Toennies's quest for community has important implications for developing a critical theory of urban politics and urban public policy. The way in which he conceptualizes the erosion of community at the metropolitan level in modern society is important for my own notion of modern metropolitan life. Toennies's work bathes the urban world of modernity in a much more pessimistic light than that cast upon it by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Yet, like Marx and Engels, it was his contact with the world of metropolitan capitalist modernity that generated a rich and provocative theory of modern society.

The concepts *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* themselves are not original to Toennies. In fact, they can be traced through the philosophical

works of Confucius, Plato, Saint Augustine, Aquinas, Ibn Khaldun, and Hegel.<sup>10</sup> But the specific formulation that Toennies develops in his own work is significant because he relates it to the development of capitalism and the emergence of the modern capitalist city.

The basis of *Gesellschaft* is a conception of capitalist society that parallels that developed by Marx. Toennies's discussion of the problem of value and exchange, for example, is derived directly from Marx.<sup>11</sup> The essence of *Gesellschaft*, according to Toennies, is captured by the separation of use value from exchange value, which occurs in the exchange process. In *Gemeinschaft* what is required and valued by an individual normally corresponds to what is required and valued by the community. It is therefore of the nature of custom and involves an organic sense of traditional behaviour.<sup>12</sup> Individual and communal fulfilment are thus not contradictory phenomena. But in *Gesellschaft*, on the other hand, what is valued by an individual may be harmful to the community:

For a thing to be of any value in the *Gesellschaft* it is only necessary that it be possessed by one party to the exclusion of another and that it be desired by one other individual. Apart from this requirement all its other characteristics are insignificant.<sup>13</sup>

What counts, then, is the good's exchange value and not its usefulness. Although Toennies was aware of the critique of Marx's value theory by the German marginalist school, he argued that the labour theory of value and the notion of socially necessary labour time was critical as a mode of understanding and analyzing "the essential structure of *Gesellschaft*."<sup>14</sup>

For Toennies, the qualities of *Gesellschaft* are crystallized in city life. City life all but eclipses the older rural and small-town traditions of *Gemeinschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* may live on in city life, but in decaying and lingering form. As city life becomes the predominant form of social existence, *Gesellschaft* becomes pervasive. According to Toennies, "the more general the condition of *Gesellschaft* becomes in the nation or group of nations, the more this entire 'country' or the entire 'world' begins to resemble one large city."<sup>15</sup> The very pinnacle of *Gesellschaft* is the metropolis where "money and capital are unlimited and almighty."<sup>16</sup>

According to Toennies, *Gesellschaft* is composed of atomized individuals who are separated from each other by their work and their conception of self-interest. The fragmented world of *Gesellschaft* production and exchange in which there is only an illusion of community parallels the reified world described by Marx in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*.<sup>17</sup> Relationships among non-related people in *Gesellschaft* occur through the medium of contractual exchange, facilitated by money. Instead of tradition and custom ruling *Gesellschaft* as they do *Gemeinschaft*, *Gesellschaft* is ruled by the dictates of commercial exchange.

Human relations are reduced to deliveries and promises, and instrumental reason predominates:

In *Gesellschaft* every person strives for that which is to his own advantage and he affirms the actions of others only in so far and as long as they can further his own interest.<sup>18</sup>

Even where mutual co-operation occurs in *Gesellschaft*, its basis is selfish and the mutuality involved superficial. Such co-operation

consists of an exchange of words and courtesies in which everyone seems to be present for the good of everyone else and everyone seems to consider everyone else as his equal, whereas in reality everyone is thinking of himself and trying to bring to the fore his importance and advantages in competition with the others.<sup>19</sup>

Calculation, according to Toennies, is thus central to all relationships in *Gesellschaft* and everyone is affected by the commercial outlook. All men become, in Adam Smith's words, "in some measure a merchant." Whereas art and artisanship are, according to Toennies, fundamental to *Gemeinschaft*, they are replaced by profit making and accumulation in *Gesellschaft*. Rational, deliberative behaviour calculated to generate profits and get ahead becomes the societal norm.

How contemporary these thoughts seem. During the last decade in the major metropolises of Western society, getting ahead, "making it," driving a fancy car, moving in the fast lane, making a fortune have become the new individual objectives, for young people in particular. Idealism and commitment to public service have been tossed aside like so many shopworn clichés. The major downtown streets have become choked with flashy cars driven by expensively dressed, fast-moving, fast-talking men and women. The metropolitan ideal of the 1980s became the stockbroker, the ultimate huckster. Indeed, prior to the stock market crash in 1987 there seemed to be no limit to how far one could go.

Of course, Toennies acknowledged that not everyone could become a successful merchant. Those who lack the necessary resources and good fortune are condemned to offer their labour power as a commodity for sale to capitalists:

The merchants or capitalists (the owners of money which can be increased by double exchange) are the natural masters and rulers of the *Gesellschaft*. The *Gesellschaft* exists for their sake. It is their tool. . . . According to the conception of natural law characteristic of *Gesellschaft* all human beings as rational persons and free agents are, a priori, equal. . . . Everyone can, if he has the materials and tools, produce new things and acquire ownership in them by his own labour. And, thus, everybody can transform his activities into a commodity to sell. . . . To the extent that the free workers. . . . become

deprived of property—as the possession of working tools and consumption goods—the natural rule of free merchants and capitalists over workers in the *Gesellschaft* is realized and becomes actual domination, in spite of the latter's freedom. They become mere possessors of working power . . . who are forced by circumstances (i.e., the impossibility of living otherwise) and are, therefore, waiting to sell their labour for money.<sup>20</sup>

A substantial portion, then, of Toennies's discussion of *Gesellschaft* is concerned with analyzing the exchange relationships that predominate in terms borrowed directly from Marx. The notions of surplus value, capital accumulation, and the divergence of value from price are all included in Toennies's discussion.<sup>21</sup>

Toennies concludes that the essential structure of *Gesellschaft* can be described in terms of three acts: the purchase of labour; the employment of labour in the production of commodities; and the realization of the value of labour imparted to commodities by their sale. Whereas the capitalists are active and free participants in all three stages of the process, workers are only partially free in the first act, objectified in the second, and virtually excluded from the third. Thus, capitalists are therefore

to be considered voluntary, enthusiastic, and material elements of *Gesellschaft*; opposite them is the mass of partially voluntary and only formal operators. Interest and participation in these three acts . . . are equivalent to the complete orientation of *Gesellschaft* and the acceptance of its existence and its underlying conventions.<sup>22</sup>

*Gesellschaft* contrasts with *Gemeinschaft* as an ideal type in terms that some historians may associate with rural and feudal life only with some scepticism. The attributes of warmth, intimacy, and sense of social solidarity and community life that, according to Toennies, typify *Gemeinschaft* stand in stark relief to the cold, calculating, privatized world of *Gesellschaft*.

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 . . . *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. . . . 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*. To make the word combination "joint-stock *Gemeinschaft*" would be abominable. On the other hand, there exists a *Gemeinschaft* of ownership in fields, forests and pasture. The *Gemeinschaft*

of property between man and wife cannot be called *Gesellschaft* of property. . . . "(W)herever 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.<sup>23</sup>

*Gemeinschaft*, according to Toennies, can proceed through a number of stages. In each of these stages it is characterized by mutual interaction and shared feelings that are commonly associated with family and extended family relationships. Out of a *Gemeinschaft* based upon blood ties, a *Gemeinschaft* of "locality or common habitat" can develop. This stage can in turn be followed by a *Gemeinschaft* of "mind, which implies only co-operation and co-ordinated action for a common goal." The conjunction of all three of these stages represents for Toennies "the truly human and supreme form of community."<sup>24</sup>

Wherever individuals relate their wills in an "organic" manner, according to Toennies, a *Gemeinschaft* relationship is established.<sup>25</sup> *Gemeinschaft* may occur within the confines of the family home, in a rural neighbourhood, or among members of the same religious order. It may even occur in a somewhat more tenuous manner in a town where crafts and callings are similar and where the opportunities for meetings and shared experiences are frequent in order that the ties of friendship and commonality can be maintained.

Human beings in a *Gemeinschaft* are bound together by consensus, that is, "a reciprocal, binding sentiment" that is the basis of the special social force and sympathy on which the foundations of *Gemeinschaft* rest. This consensus is achieved through the means of shared language, which expresses "intimacy, fondness and affection." This shared language facilitates understanding, "a unity of the will" that "binds human hearts and minds" in the development of a "common state of mind with common customs and beliefs."<sup>26</sup>

The importance of this shared language to the development of a sense of community is reinforced in the light of work by theorists such as Maurice Halbwachs.<sup>27</sup> Halbwachs, who was a student and follower of Emile Durkheim, argued that the very foundations of collective memory and, therefore, community association lay in the capacity for shared experience. This kind of shared experience was greatly enhanced by a common language, a common way of responding and attaching symbolic significance to experience. Without this sense of collective participation in the world around them, people would retreat into their isolated subjective states of consciousness, and reality would take on an amnesiac ahistorical appearance. Toennies's emphasis upon shared language as a



binding ingredient in the construction of a sense of community is thus a very valuable insight.

According to Toennies, daily life in a *Gemeinschaft* revolves around "mutual possession and enjoyment and also possession of and enjoyment of common goods."<sup>28</sup> Mutual aid, organic wholeness, and exchange based upon just prices and peaceful trade of simple commodity production are characteristic of *Gemeinschaft*. None of the trading relationships involves professional traders or monopolists. Even the exchange relations between the town guild masters and the country peasants who form the cornerstone of *Gemeinschaft* are based upon a "just exchange." The town of feudal times, as opposed to the emerging city of capitalist times, is marked by the enduring quality of its relationships, the continual reproduction of its shared intellectual attitudes, and the commitment of its craftsmen and architects to artistic and decorative achievement in the service of the community.<sup>29</sup>

Strict attention is given to pleasing and harmonious forms of speech, performances and work, that is, to all that itself has rhythm and harmony or suits the quiet mood of those attending, as if they had created it themselves. All that is displeasing, without restraint, and contrary to tradition is abhorred and rejected.<sup>30</sup>

Toennies's description of the role and importance of speech and dramatic performance in *Gemeinschaft* is reminiscent of the importance of the oral tradition in the Greek polis. Theatre in the Greek polis was not simply a bourgeois diversion, but an ongoing part of community life in which many thousands of citizens participated as members of an outdoor audience.<sup>31</sup> So the Socratic dialogues and their search for philosophical truth are the historical legacy of an oral tradition which was once an integral part of public life.<sup>32</sup> Even in Shakespeare's time the outdoor dramatic spectacle still preserved some of the public tradition and citizen involvement that had characterized the polis.<sup>33</sup>

It is symptomatic of the war between those metropolitan interests who view the city as a commercial enterprise and those who still seek a sense of community that recently in London the heritage and artistic communities have struggled against the plans of the government and a major developer to build a carpark over the site of one of Shakespeare's original theatres, the Rose. The carpark would have involved destroying the archaeological foundations of the old theatre. The arts and heritage communities were up in arms, pointing out the absurdity of the English government desecrating the site used by one of England's greatest writers, who symbolizes the very essence of English culture. The fact that this struggle was even necessary reveals the extent to which *Gesellschaft* has penetrated the modern metropolis. After all, in *Gesellschaft* terms a

profitable carpark is clearly of more importance than the ruins of a theatre!

Despite the proliferation of car parks in modern metropolises, there have been attempts to resuscitate this outdoor public tradition of spectacle. Thus, street musicians, outdoor jazz festivals, and wandering magicians and minstrels have reappeared in a number of larger cities. Unfortunately, all too often these performers are strictly regulated or driven from the streets by authorities, or even worse, recruited for some commercial venture. Of course, in some metropolises, particularly in the United States, people in the evenings are too busy running from street muggers to pay much attention to street entertainment.

According to Toennies, the coming of *Gesellschaft* and the urban metropolis eroded the centrality of shared language, speech, art and artisanship in the service of the community. These aspects of communal life fade before the dictates of cold, calculating reason in *Gesellschaft*. Whereas shared values are developed and celebrated in performance, public speech, and art in *Gemeinschaft*, individual values and interests are promoted and business displaces art and performance from the centre stage in *Gesellschaft*.<sup>34</sup> What shared language that remains is the language of commerce. How true this rings in the modern era.

Toennies develops the dichotomy between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* further by exploring the relationship between the concepts of "natural will" (*Wesenwill*) and "rational will" (*Kurwill*). Whereas natural will is "immanent in activity" and is organic, inborn, inherited, and develops according to the development of the individual influenced by heredity and the surrounding environment, rational will precedes activity and is a product and process of thought that develops in accordance with the "fully developed will inherent in the human organism."<sup>35</sup>

Rational will dominates the natural will by making possible the actualization of potentials within the natural will. It consists of three forms: deliberation, discrimination, and concept. Rational will facilitates calculation, whereby individuals control their own feelings, masking them where to express them might be detrimental, and where necessary substituting lies for truth. Rational will permits the adjustment of behaviour and the display of opinions and feelings, according to the circumstances, concealing their ends as necessary. As such, according to Toennies, rational will is central to the new capitalist personality that dominates *Gesellschaft*. The organic, instinctive, and traditional personality of *Gemeinschaft* gives way to the calculating personality of *Gesellschaft*.

According to Toennies, the calculating person may appear to do many things for nothing. But in reality all such actions are carefully calculated. "The final account of his actions must not only recover his

losses but also yield a profit which is not counter-balanced by any part of his original outlay. This profit is the ultimate aim."<sup>36</sup>

Lest anyone think that this notion of instrumental reason is not operational in contemporary urban life, stop and think for a moment about how you have spent the past few days at work and in conversation with your friends and colleagues. How often have you said exactly what was on your mind? How often have you thought strategically instead and spoken only what you thought was advisable? One of the hardest lessons of life in the modern metropolis is learning how to mask our true feelings and censor ourselves in conversation. Failure to learn to do this is a prescription for major trouble and major disappointment, particularly if one works in any kind of bureaucratic environment. As Max Weber explains in detail, the modern metropolis has also involved the growth of bureaucracy.

The will to power, according to Toennies, is also central to the calculating personality. Since "money means power over all goods and pleasures which can be reduced to this domination," the pursuit of money in *Gesellschaft* is identical to the pursuit of power. Even the pursuit of knowledge in *Gesellschaft* is undertaken not for its own sake, but as a means of extending one's domination over others.

Significantly, Toennies cites Hobbes in support of his argument that the will to power is central to the calculating personality.<sup>37</sup> But whereas Hobbes's argument is couched in terms that suggest the will to power is endemic in human nature, Toennies's argument is that it is bound up in the nature of *Gesellschaft*, itself only an epoch of human history.<sup>38</sup>

As part of the pervasiveness of calculation and power seeking in *Gesellschaft*, social relationships become increasingly instrumentalized. Vanity and self-interest, the "endeavour to make favourable impression," become the motives for sociability. Other people become reduced to objects reflecting like a mirror one's own vanity and the means for advancing one's own self-interest.<sup>39</sup> Thus, for Toennies, instrumental reason becomes the lynchpin of capitalist *Gesellschaft*.<sup>40</sup>

Toennies argues that because rational will does not involve "any positive attitude toward fellow human beings . . . rooted in sentiment, mind and conscience" but is bound up with one's self-interest, any achievements of the rational will cannot be seen as general virtues of the human spirit. From the perspective of the natural will, the individual dominated by the rational will is seen as "heartless, bad, evil or indifferent."<sup>41</sup>

Rational will, on the other hand, produces no emotional feelings whatsoever. The person dominated by rational will "knows only allies or opponents with regards to the ends he pursues. Both are only forces or powers to him, and feelings of hatred or ire toward the one are as improper as feelings of love or pity for the others."<sup>42</sup>

Toennies characterizes natural will as fluid, soft, and warm, whereas

rational will is dry, hard, and cold. Natural will is concrete, whereas rational will is abstract. Rational will is the product of mechanical labour, whereas natural will is the product of organic activity. In *Gemeinschaft* where natural will predominates, artistic activity remains creative. But in *Gesellschaft* it becomes routinized, repetitive, and mechanical. Thus, we can compare the paintings of the masters of Renaissance times and the decorative arts and architecture of the city-state of the medieval period with the mass-produced commercial art and functional design of the modern metropolitan period. The aesthetic dimension, which was central to *Gemeinschaft*, has become overwhelmed by the productive dimension, which is central to *Gesellschaft*.<sup>43</sup>

Stroll down a major avenue of a North American metropolis and look skyward at the buildings. Do the same thing in an Italian city such as Florence or Venice, or even Rome. The visual impact is immediate. The new post-modern epoch is architecture attempts to restore decoration as part of design, but with a few notable exceptions it has failed to escape from the clutches of crass commercialism.<sup>44</sup>

Toennies also contrasts the "conscience" of the common people found in *Gemeinschaft* with the "consciousness" of the educated classes found in *Gesellschaft*. The "conscience" of *Gemeinschaft* "manifests itself as affirmation and matured affection for others, as feeling for that which is good or evil."<sup>45</sup> It involves respect for traditions, natural behaviour, and authority. Even in *Gesellschaft* the residue of such a conscience can be overcome only with great difficulty:

Only the educated, knowing enlightened individual in so far as he is a noble erudite thinking individual in whom it reaches highest perfection and most subtle expression can destroy conscience in himself in a complete and radical manner by abandoning the belief of his ancestors and his people because he understands their underlying principles.<sup>46</sup>

While there is much that is potentially reactionary in the kind of affirmation of tradition that Toennies attributes to *Gemeinschaft*, the disavowal of tradition is not necessarily progressive. In a sense it has been the tendency of liberal modernity to abandon all traditions including those associated with collective goals that has undermined much working-class consciousness and social solidarity in the twentieth century. The current obsession with laissez-faire and the cult of the atomized individual further undermines social solidarity and guarantees an increase in crime, environmental degradation, and acts of excessive selfishness, cruelty, and neglect. True community requires a balance between the needs of individuals and those of the collective. Truly free individuals are born of vibrant community life and get their inspiration and energies from the warmth and shelter of their communal or family heritage. An

overemphasis upon either dimension of this formulation results in distortions and pathologies. I return to this theme in detail in the final chapter.

### GESELLSCHAFT, THE DECLINE OF COMMUNITY, AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

Toennies's discussion of the changes that take place in moving from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* places considerable emphasis upon the impact of rationality on the older, more emotionally rooted belief systems that prevail in *Gemeinschaft*. One of the important insights one can draw from this notion is the consequences that an increased emphasis upon rationality might have for a sense of community in the modern metropolis. Certainly the overall thrust of Toennies's argument is to suggest the dissolution of community in *Gesellschaft*. Since Toennies was keenly aware of Marx's work, he also was interested in the forces modern metropolitan capitalism might create that would overcome the alienated state of *Gesellschaft*. In Marx's dream world this force was, of course, the modern proletariat.

In Toennies's world, however, this urban-based proletariat might not, in the end, have the capacity to transcend *Gesellschaft*. In Marx's schema, as we have seen, the key to the success of the proletariat was the development of class consciousness. But the development of class consciousness in Marx's theory depends upon a number of critical ingredients. Some of these ingredients were rooted in ontology, others in the specific circumstances of industrial metropolitan life. Toennies's discussion of *Gesellschaft*, which is itself a response to the shock of urban alienation, has a useful contribution to make in pointing out certain problems in Marx's conceptualization.

In moving from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, from rural and guild-town society to urban metropolitan society, Toennies argues that reason replaces belief. Belief systems and tradition may well have been a bulwark against the development of working-class consciousness because of their conservative predisposition. But the replacement of these influences by instrumental reason may constitute as great a barrier while at the same time eroding the social solidarity that existed in *Gemeinschaft*, for the development of class consciousness in the Marxian model cannot be purely rooted in a logical calculation of interest. Indeed, as Agnes Heller has pointed out, the notion of class interest and the Marxist conception of class consciousness in the sense of a class conscious of the universal role it is to play in the unfolding of the historical process are to an extent contradictory concepts.<sup>47</sup>

For Marx, the proletariat is the first class in history whose emancipation of necessity entails the emancipation of the whole of society. Hence, it has a potentially universal nature that corresponds to the species' need

for a classless society, a "community in which individuals can realize their personality" for the first time in human history.<sup>48</sup> The proletariat, according to Marx, because it is not of civil society can be the basis of the emancipation of both itself and of all civil society. Other groups and classes may claim to embody the universal rights of society and thereby justify their universal class, but their domination requires the subjugation of others who are excluded from civil society. Marx poses the problem in the following terms:

Where then, is the positive possibility of . . . emancipation? Our answer:—in the formation of a class with radical chains, a class of civil society that is not of civil society, a class that is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society having a universal right because of its universal suffering and claiming no particular wrong but unqualified wrong is perpetrated on it; a sphere that can claim no traditional title but only a human title; . . . a sphere, finally, that cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all the other spheres of society, thereby emancipating them, a sphere, in short, that is the complete loss of humanity and can only redeem itself through the total redemption of humanity. This dissolution of society existing as a particular class is the proletariat.<sup>49</sup>

Because of this universal role for the proletariat in Marx's social theory, Heller argues that the notion of class interest must be seen to be a non-universal category that belongs to the sphere of alienated capitalist society. The emancipatory universal role for the proletariat must "transcend the world of interests." According to Heller:

"Interest" is not for Marx a philosophical social category of a general character. Interest as a motive of individual action is nothing but the expression of the reduction of needs to greed: in the philosophical generalization of the concept of interest, it is the standpoint of bourgeois society that is reflected.<sup>50</sup>

Marx's approach to the concept of "class interest" is therefore ambiguous. This is clear in the ambivalent attitude he took toward the struggle of trade unions. To the extent that trade unions confined their struggle solely to the sharing of surplus within the wage system, rather than seeking to abolish the system overall, despite the sense of group association they promoted, they would remain defensive organizations rather than agencies of universal emancipation.<sup>51</sup> Class interest, therefore, at best, is a concept that can only reflect a defensive posture on the part of the working class. It can never be the sole basis of a movement for universal emancipation.

To the extent that the notions of instrumental reason and the calculation of interest remain central to *Gesellschaft*, therefore, it can be argued that these qualities militate against the development of a cultural milieu in which working-class consciousness can develop. Historical studies of

the development of working-class consciousness in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in fact, have emphasized the critical role that tradition, shared language, emotions, and customs played in the development of such consciousness.<sup>52</sup> It was precisely from these traditions that a popular culture developed that sustained the struggle out of which class consciousness was forged.

Thus, paradoxically, despite the conservative nature of *Gemeinschaft*, it may well be the case that many of the features that characterize it are of critical importance in the development of class consciousness. The atomized world of *Gesellschaft*, on the other hand, may be sterile soil for the development of both class consciousness and social solidarity. To the extent to which *Gesellschaft*, which Toennies conceptualized as corresponding to modern capitalist urbanized society, actually predominates in our cities, then the absence of social solidarity and working-class consciousness should come as no surprise.

The lack of receptivity of *Gesellschaft* to the development of class consciousness can be further appreciated in the light of Toennies's discussion of community, work, and education in *Gesellschaft*. According to Toennies, in *Gesellschaft* the community becomes debased in value. The very basis of community life, the household itself,

becomes sterile, narrow, empty and debased to fit the conception of a mere living place which can be obtained everywhere in equal form for money. As such, it [becomes] nothing but shelter for those on a journey through the world.<sup>53</sup>

Since the conception of class consciousness, as understood by Marx, presupposed a sense of place and community, the destruction of these influences in *Gesellschaft* undermines social solidarity and the potential for class consciousness. The very notion of a sense of place has increasingly become an anachronism in modern metropolises, particularly in North America.<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, a sense of place is often at odds with the grandiose visions of modern urban developers who impose their monumental visions of concrete, steel, glass, and Muzak upon the urban landscape. Places are merely sentimental residue of decaying districts that need to be swept away by the march of progress. Expressways cut through old neighbourhoods, and characterless concrete towers blast older, smaller, and more intimate buildings into the oblivion of the past. The warmth, intimacy, and even familiar decay of the local neighbourhood repertory theatre gives way to the functional sterility of the movie-house chain complete with characterless staff for whom the tinsel, schmaltz, and violence of Hollywood is the only stuff of cinematic art. Even the popcorn tastes like plastic!<sup>55</sup>

The process of work in *Gesellschaft* also undergoes debasement. In

*Gemeinschaft*, according to Toennies, work is often meaningful and carries with it "style and dignity and a sense of charm" and is regarded as a calling. However, in *Gesellschaft* work is reduced to a means, a pure transaction, monetary in nature, which becomes "barren and monotonous."<sup>56</sup> In the same way, the education of children in *Gesellschaft*, rather than being directed toward the "creation of a social sentiment, the ennoblement of the mind and the education of a conscience," is instead harnessed to the service of instrumental reason. Scientific and technical knowledge rather than moral development is stressed. Thus, the spirit of *Gemeinschaft* is continually undermined by education.<sup>57</sup>

Those of us who teach university and college have experienced this process at close range. The depressing search for grades and courses that lead to high-paying jobs and commercial success has become an epidemic among the young. I realize the high rate of unemployment during the 1980s plays an important role here. However, the majority of contemporary students, rather than seeking to understand the causes of higher unemployment and searching for social solutions, have opted for the "me first" solution. The debasement of culture and the thirst for "profitable" knowledge clearly has its roots in the growth of *Gesellschaft* values.

In general, the orientation of *Gesellschaft* is toward the development of a labour force that is dominated by the rational will. Men and women alike are increasingly drawn into a process by which they tend to become "enlightened, cold-hearted and conscious" of the need to think in a calculating way.<sup>58</sup>

Yet, despite the pervasiveness of *Gesellschaft* in modern urban society, Toennies shared with Marx the belief that the individual worker could overcome the isolation of his or her individual conscience and develop a "moral-humane consciousness" that would lead the proletariat to emancipation.

Thus, the common people become a proletariat, and much against the will of the educated class when this latter group is to be identified with capitalistic *Gesellschaft*, they learn to think and become conscious of the conditions under which they are chained to the labour market. From such knowledge, decisions and attempts to break these chains originate. They unite into labour unions and parties for social and political action.<sup>59</sup>

The process by which this class consciousness develops in *Gesellschaft*, however, is not made clear by Toennies in his work on *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. In the end, in his book, class consciousness appears to develop from a deep sense of deprivation and lack of alternatives. Despite his own analysis of the atomizing nature of *Gesellschaft* and its institutions, Toennies suggests that the masses "become conscious through education in schools and through newspapers."<sup>60</sup> Toennies does not appear to have a theoretical explanation of how alienation is over-



come that matches in breadth of intellectual sophistication his analysis of alienated *Gesellschaft*, itself.

Nevertheless, Toennies is certain that such a class-conscious proletariat will arise:

City life and *Gesellschaft* down the common people to decay and death; in vain they struggle to attain power through their own multitude, and it seems to them that they can use their power only for a revolution if they want to free themselves from their fate.... They proceed from class consciousness to class struggle.<sup>61</sup>

For Toennies, however, such a revolutionary class carried with it great risks; for modern society, in his view, had been transformed by capitalism into "a civilization of state and *Gesellschaft*" in which the old culture had been seriously eroded. If the destruction of this new civilization were to take place without any of the seeds of that culture remaining alive, from which the "essence and idea of *Gemeinschaft*" could be recreated, those cultural values might be doomed forever.<sup>62</sup>

Toennies thus saw in the proletariat the possibility of rekindling the spirit of *Gemeinschaft*. In that sense, as for Marx, the proletariat was the social embodiment of his quest for community. The city, the site of so much that was negative for the spirit of humanity, could yet be a place where the dream of a more solidaristic society might eventually be rekindled. There could be no turning back to the rural communities of the past no matter how much one yearned for this voyage of recovery.

However, as I have suggested, it would seem that the very coldness, instrumentality, and calculation characteristic of *Gesellschaft* militate against the development of a class consciousness and social solidarity. In the absence of a convincing theory of how such consciousness could arise and *Gesellschaft* could be transcended in Toennies's own terms, his quest for community must remain unfulfilled.

Despite the contradictions in Toennies's work, it remains an extraordinarily powerful account of the changes that nineteenth-century capitalism had wrought upon human settlement. The metropolis as the very embodiment of *Gesellschaft* was firmly rooted in the daily experience of millions by the end of the nineteenth century. While elements of *Gemeinschaft* may have lingered on and persisted in its porous social space, its overall motion and its daily rhythms have tended in a much more atomized direction. It was these rhythms and their impact upon the consciousness of the metropolitan resident that fascinated another German observer of the city, Georg Simmel. The subject of the next chapter is Simmel's notion of the metropolis and mental life.

## NOTES

1. See A. Mitzman, *Sociology and Estrangement* (New York: Knopf, 1970), pp. 116ff. and F. Toennies, *Karl Marx: His Life and His Teachings*, translated and edited by C. Loomis (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1957), pp. 156ff. for an elaboration of Toennies's belief in the moral basis for socialism, both as its *raison d'être* and as a means for attaining it. See also F. Pappenheim, *The Alienation of Modern Man* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959) for a very insightful discussion of Toennies.
2. See Mitzman, *Estrangement*, pp. 41ff.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 61ff. and 84-87.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 58-60. Toennies undertook a major study of Hobbes and published several essays and books on Hobbes's philosophy as well as editing several of Hobbes's manuscripts. See "Anmerkungen ueber die Philosophie des Hobbes," *Vierteljabress chrift fuer Wissenschaftliche Philosophie* 3 (1879):453-66; (1880):55-74, 428-53; 5 (1881):186-204; *Thomas Hobbes: Leben und Lehre* (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1896); *Thomas Hobbes: The Elements of Law Natural and Public* (editor) (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1889) and *Thomas Hobbes: Behemoth or the long Parliament* (editor) (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1889); "Hobbes Analekten I & II" *Archiv fuer Geschichte der Philosophie* 17 (1904):291-317 and 19 (1906):153-75. Toennies also wrote a study of Marx, cited in note 1 above. For his views on Rousseau, see his "Development of Sociology in Germany in the Nineteenth Century," in *On Social Ideas and Ideologies*, edited and translated by E. G. Jacoby (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 125-26.
5. Toennies, "Development of Sociology in Germany," pp. 125-26. Toennies is here discussing the work of Rousseau and the German writers Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, but it is clear that he subscribes to the same vision.
6. Mitzman, *Estrangement*, pp. 52ff.
7. F. Toennies, "The Individual and the World in Modern Culture," in *On Sociology: Pure, Applied, and Empirical: Selected Writings*, edited by W. J. Cahnman and R. Heberle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 293.
8. On these notions, see Thorstein Veblen, "The Intellectual Pre-eminence of the Modern European Jew," in *Essays in Our Changing Order* (New York: Viking Press, 1943); R. Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), pp. 18-20; Max Horkheimer, "Social Space," in *Dawn and Decline* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978).

9. See Mitzman, *Estrangement*, pp. 55-56, 63-66, and 87-90.
10. P. Sorokin, "Foreword" to F. Toennies, *Community and Society*, translated and edited by C. Loomis (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1957).
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 65ff. Compare with K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Everyman Press, 1960), ch. 1. See also Toennies, *Karl Marx: His Life and His Teachings*.
12. See the discussion of custom in F. Toennies, *Custom: An Essay on Social Codes* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1961).
13. Toennies, *Community and Society*, p. 68.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 101-103.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 228. See also the discussion of the differences between the city and the country in F. Toennies, "The Concept of Gemeinschaft," in *On Sociology: Pure, Applied, and Empirical*, pp. 70-71.
17. Cf. K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961).
18. Toennies, *Community and Society*, p. 77.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 93ff.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-35.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
25. For a discussion of organicist thought in the nineteenth century, see A. Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 66ff.
26. Toennies, *Community and Society*, p. 49.
27. See Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980). See also Fiona Mackie, *The Status of Everyday Life: A Sociological Excavation of the Prevailing Framework of Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).
28. Toennies, *Community and Society*, p. 59.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
31. See W. G. Burgh, *The Legacy of the Ancient World* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1963), pp. 148-51.
32. See H. Innis, "The Oral Tradition and Greek Civilization," in *Empire and Communications* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972).
33. For a discussion of the relationship of theatre to public life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Random House, 1978).
34. Toennies, *Community and Society*, pp. 63 and 228. We can recognize

in Toennies certain ideas about the culture of communications that Harold Innis developed in detail in his work *The Bias of Communications* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972). Toennies suggests that with the rise of *Gesellschaft*, the arts and media, in general, are increasingly harnessed to capitalistic ends and are oriented toward social control. In his works, Innis focuses on the social controlling aspects of modern communications media and their replacement of traditional media of communications including speech and performance. See *The Bias of Communications*, pp. 81-82 and *Empire and Communications*, pp. 53-85. Toennies's emphasis upon public discourse in *Gemeinschaft* is also of interest in the light of the recent work of Jurgen Habermas. Although Habermas argues that the notion of public discourse and discursive will formation arises out of the struggle of the bourgeoisie against the absolutist state, the importance that he attaches to the concept of a public sphere in the realization of a democratic society and the erosion and transformation of the public sphere into a mechanism for social control is foreshadowed in a certain sense in Toennies's work. See J. Habermas, *Theory and Practice* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1974) and *Strukturwandel der Offentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der burgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Neuwied, 1965). For a very useful summary of the debate over Habermas's thesis, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Critical Theory, Public Sphere and Culture: Jurgen Habermas and his Critics," *New German Critique*, no. 16 (Winter 1979).

35. Toennies, *Community and Society*, pp. 105 and 122-23.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
38. See C. B. Macpherson for the full development of the argument that Hobbes's analysis of civil society in *The Leviathan* was more truly an analysis of nascent capitalism rather than of human nature per se. C. B. Macpherson, *The Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
39. Toennies, *Community and Society*, p. 127.
40. For discussion of the concept of instrumental reason, see M. Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974) and *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974).
41. Toennies, *Community and Society*, p. 130.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
44. See Paul Goldenberger, *On the Rise: Architecture and Design in the Postmodern Age* (New York: New York Times Books, 1983); Hal Foster, ed., *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), in particular the essays by Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Incom-

- plete Project" and Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance"; and J. Habermas, "Modern and Postmodern Architecture" in *Critical Theory and Public Life*, edited by J. Forester (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).
45. Toennies, *Community and Society*, p. 158.
  46. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
  47. See A. Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx* (London: Allison and Busby, 1974) and "Towards a Marxist Theory of Value," in *Kinests* 5, no. 1.
  48. Heller, "Towards a Marxist Theory of Value," p. 50.
  49. K. Marx, "Introduction to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, edited by J. O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 141-42.
  50. Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, p. 58.
  51. *Ibid.*, p. 66. See also K. Marx, *Wages, Prices and Profits* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), p. 78.
  52. See, for example, E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), in particular pp. 781-915. See also J. Clarke, C. Critcher, and R. Johnson, *Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London: Hutchinson, 1979).
  53. Toennies, *Community and Society*, p. 162.
  54. On the destruction of a sense of place, see E. Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Press, 1977); M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982); Donald Horne, *The Public Culture: The Triumph of Industrialism* (London: Pluto Press, 1986); Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1974).
  55. For a parallel treatment of the role of the electronic media in promoting placelessness, see J. Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). For a historical treatment of the destruction of place in order to stamp out breeding grounds for rebellion, see David Harvey, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), particularly chs. 3 and 4.
  56. Toennies, *Community and Society*, p. 165.
  57. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
  58. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
  59. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
  60. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
  61. *Ibid.*, pp. 230-31. Toennies in his later work became more uncertain about the transformation of the modern state into genuine community as well as the likelihood of a proletarian revolution. See *Karl*

- Marx: His Life and His Teachings*, pp. 157-62 and "The Nature of Sociology," in *On Sociology: Pure, Applied, and Empirical*, p. 106.
62. Toennies, *Community and Society*, p. 227. See also *Karl Marx: His Life and His Teachings*, pp. 161-62; W. J. Cahnman, *Ferdinand Toennies: A New Evaluation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973).