

Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft

When discussing Toennie's models of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft it is important to keep in mind that these are only ideal models by which we can make comparison, and promote debate on the various social and political structures. No form of government or society in existence today is purely one form or the other of these polar models.

I believe it can be effectively argued that every society must have some measure of both Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. Even for the liberal there must be some type of control that allows for the guarantee of each individual's right to do as he or she pleases. The fact that the liberal concedes no right must be exercised to the harm of others implies, and demands, some social control. And, social control can only be accomplished if the members of the society agree to allow such control. Some form of contract must, therefore, be instituted whereby the population of a society grants the exercise of such control to specified entities within the society. Even though these entities are in turn controlled by the society, the fact remains, there is some sort of contract within the society allowing what amounts to self-control.

John Stuart Mill wrote of a society where each man was free to express his thoughts and opinions, and every man studies and discusses the opinions of others in an effort to find Truth. (Mill, p. 45) In a perfect Gemeinschaft society this would be possible; because, in this perfect society there would be no need to enforce the right to allow each person to express his or her own opinion. In this perfect society each man or woman would desire to openly discuss opposing opinions, and be willing to encompass each other's thoughts into a common belief, when and once they saw the truth embodied in the opinion of others.

But we do not live in a world where this kind of perfection is present. I do not believe it has ever been present. I do not believe this kind of perfection is possible. Man develops

opinions based both on experience and what has been passed down to him from within his particular society. Most often members of a particular society will dogmatically cling to these opinions. Their thoughts become the standard by which they live, and the basis by which they will most likely attempt to convert "non-believers" to their way of thinking. On the surface there seems to be nothing wrong with this outlook. It appears to still allow freedom to express ideas, and the concurrent freedom to oppose those ideas. In a perfect *Gemeinschaft* society this would be the end of it; but in any realistic society someone will invariably come along and try to force their beliefs on others. When this happens freedom is not simply threatened, it is already lost. Unless, that is, there is some kind of social control that effectively prevents someone from forcing his or her opinions on another. Mill's argument included the need to ensure that the will of the majority did not infringe on the rights of the individual.

The anarchist, however, would disagree with the need for any social control. More precisely, he would disagree with the need for any entity within the society which is designed to have authority to control. In theory their society would indeed be pure *Gemeinschaft*. "They see the goals of liberty and equality as mutual self-supporting." (*An Anarchist*, p. 2) So, whereas the liberal concedes a need for some authority, though demanding that all authority be justified, the anarchist believes that no man should be allowed to exercise authority over another.

If one is to believe, as I do, that man is not inherently capable of exercising the level of self-control that is needed to maintain such a society, he or she must then dismiss pure anarchism as coming closest to pure *Gemeinschaft*, if not at least the mirror image with minor flaws, but impossible to attain. Some social control is necessary.

Because anarchy is so closely related to the idea of *Gemeinschaft* it is not realistically a viable government option. It depends too much on kinship and friendship for social order and

well-being. Once any member refuses to follow the norms of society, and cannot be controlled by kin or friend, and other measures must be taken to control the "rebel." Once any measure is taken to affect such control then true anarchy no longer exists. If the measure taken is a consensus of all members of the society then they have become more like a democracy than an anarchy.

The anarchist believes all men to be equal and strives to maintain equality through the freedom of each individual to do as he or she pleases. Within this theory they are counting on man to see the advantages of self-control. Democracy, too, believes in the equality of man but see the need for a kind of partnership between equals. Pure democracy is the idea of equality. All people are equal with rights granted to all without stipulation as to social rank, income, or governmental position. In this sense democracy leans toward *Gemeinschaft*. Yet, if everything is done for the common good then it safely argued that it leans more toward *Gesellschaft*. The common good, however, is not seen as a contract of expediency or present need, but rather a recognition of the brotherhood of society and the natural relationship each man should and can have with the other.

Democracy, however, admits that man needs rule in his effort to maintain order. The liberal concedes rule when it is justified, all the while looking for ways to have less and less of this type of control. Democracy, by conceding the need for rule, is able to base its theory on what Aristotle had in mind when he wrote, "For citizen-rule a people...must be able to rule and be ruled..."(Aristotle, p. 146)

In a democracy the citizens of the society have a say in who rules, but must forfeit many individual freedoms for the sake of the whole society. The individuals decide what and to what degree they are willing to give over to the authority of the government. The control of the

government is in the citizens who, in reverse, can remove anyone or any entity that they feel has abused the power they, the citizens, have given them. The government, by consent of its citizens, has the authority to control or enforce the rules as set by the citizens of the democratic society.

A democracy is probably the form of society closest to the middle between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. The individual retains autonomy over his or her life, as long as he or she stays within the bounds of the rules enforced by the government. At the local level, the community is totally controlled by all its citizens, making it closer to a *Gemeinschaft* society. But, the democratic society can also be seen as a government that is a kind of contract with the individuals of the society, ensuring protection for their rights, and conformity for all its citizens. As such it more like a *Gesellschaft* society.

In the Burkean conservative form of government we begin to see a stronger leaning toward *Gesellschaft*. It is important to consider, however, from what paradigm Burke was writing. He believed in the authority of the crown because therein lay the stability necessary to a good government. "The people of England...conceive the undisturbed succession of the crown to be a pledge of the stability and perpetuity of all the other members of our constitution." (Burke, p. 111) But he also wrote, "People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors." (Burke, p. 119) His argument was not so much for any particular form of government, though he leaned toward a monarchy, as much as it was for retaining that form of government that has overall maintained an acceptable degree of stability for its citizens. He does not go so far, however, to say that no matter what form of government a society is currently under, this is the form under which it should stay.

Unlike the liberal or the anarchist, the Burkean conservative realizes that a society is made of individuals who must be controlled "by a power outside themselves." (Burke, p. 151) This is not because he does not believe that the individual has rights, but rather because he believes that the nature of man is such that mankind as whole will not be able to discipline those natural passions that cause him to want more than he currently has. This is why he feels, "That no man should be judge in his own cause," (Burke, p. 150) because he will eventually, if not invariably, assert his own cause over the cause of another..

Like the proponents of democracy, the conservative does not ask the individual to give up his or her natural rights, but asks that they give to the government the authority to provide these rights. He does not promote this belief because of his belief that the government, any government, is right, and has the natural authority to govern; rather, he believes that government has both the power, or long standing ability, and the stability, to prevent chaos, insecurity, financial distress, and crime. It was Burke's belief that, "No country in which the population flourishes, and is in progressive improvement, can be under a very mischievous government." (Burke, p. 232) So, although he touted the monarchy of England as a form of government right for that country, he did not claim that all countries should take on their form of government. When he was warning against the tyranny of citizens as well as the tyranny of government he admitted, "There may be situations in which the purely democratic form [of government] will become necessary." (Burke, p. 228)

Whatever is stable; whatever is a natural outgrowth of the governed; this, according to the conservative, is what should determine the form of government. They believe this natural growth will always entail some give and take from both the government and its citizens. It will, in other words, be found closer to the Gesellschaft ideal of society.

Finally, at the other end of the spectrum, comes the socialist view of society. If anarchism comes closest Gemeinschaft, socialism comes closest to Gesellschaft. As in the anarchist form, in the socialist form of government the individual citizen does everything for the common good or wealth of all citizens. But unlike in anarchy, the government, in turn, distributes the wealth in as equal and fair a way as possible. This philosophy disagrees with those who favor the democratic or liberal form of government in that they do not believe that the right of property is one of the "essential rights of man." (Feuer, p. 69) Instead of individuals owning the means of production, society must take over those productive forces. Once society takes over those forces, and begins to understand and control them, it "abolishes all class distinctions and class antagonisms, [and] abolishes also the state as state." (Feuer, p. 106)

This may seem as though socialism comes closer to Gemeinschaft than Gesellschaft in that it theoretically rids society of any government control. But this is only in its pure theoretical form; which, even as such, depends on the larger society (Gesellschaft) than the local community (Gemeinschaft). Socialism does, therefore, represent the society closest to the ideal of Gesellschaft.

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