

Review

Reintroducing Ferdinand Tönnies by Christopher Adair-Toteff

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Ferdinand Tönnies is hailed as one of the founding fathers of sociology. The content of his scholarly oeuvre as well as his significant efforts leading the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* for over two decades warrant his acclaim. Tönnies is best known for his magnum opus *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887). Although they are less well-known today, Tönnies' numerous other contributions specifying the constitutive principles and several epistemic dimensions of sociology are incisive and relevant to longstanding inquiries concerning the nature and object of social inquiry. Additionally, Tönnies' pivotal contributions to reawakening interest in the thought of Thomas Hobbes and charting a course for Hobbes scholarship continue to manifest their effects. In fact, Tönnies' 1889 critical edition of Hobbes' *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic* remains the authoritative scholarly volume. Tönnies worked with and alongside many intellectual peers who were widely influential in their day and several of whom—namely, Max Scheler, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber—presently are recognized as major figures in twentieth century thought. Despite the obvious importance of his scholarly contributions and institution-building efforts, Tönnies largely has been neglected.

There have been two notable surges of interest in Tönnies' thought in Anglophone scholarship. The first of these occurred in the 1970s and was marked by the publication of several of Tönnies' minor texts in English translation. These texts complemented Charles P. Loomis' 1957 translation of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. A number of secondary works in English also appeared at this time. The second surge of interest is a phenomenon of the present. Its most prominent indicators are the publication of *The Anthem Companion to Ferdinand Tönnies* (2016), De Gruyter's several volumes of Tönnies' complete works in *Ferdinand Tönnies Gesamtausgabe* (which includes the 2019 critical edition of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*), and a series of over a dozen articles and a monograph on Tönnies by Niall Bond published by LIT Verlag (2013). The current resurgence of engagement with Tönnies is also marked by the work of a key scholar—Christopher Adair-Toteff. One of Adair-Toteff's latest works, *Reintroducing Ferdinand Tönnies* (2023), sustains the uplifting movement of this present surge of interest by demonstrating that Tönnies' guiding ideas and empirical claims are still germane to social theory and by offering an accessible guide to Tönnies' bountiful contributions.

Adair-Toteff is especially well-qualified for such a task as reintroducing a compelling social thinker and for reintroducing Tönnies in particular. His important article in *Sociological Theory* "Ferdinand Tönnies: Utopian

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Visionary” (1995) demonstrated that Tönnies’ perspective and intention have been travestied and his thought underappreciated. Adair-Totefl served as editor of *The Anthem Companion to Ferdinand Tönnies* (2016), a touchstone volume for which he assembled an international group of contributors who illuminated several dimensions of Tönnies’ ideas, legacy, and utility; he contributed the “Introduction” and a substantive chapter on the development of sociology to that volume. Adair-Totefl also has authored or edited books on several major figures in social theory, including Raymond Aron, Carl Schmitt, Edward Shils, Ernst Troeltsch, Stephen Turner, and Max Weber. Several dozen of his articles have been published in peer-reviewed journals, and his book reviews, review essays, and encyclopedia entries are even more numerous. Adair-Totefl has demonstrated serious and sustained engagement with the big questions of social theory and with the variety of conceptual frameworks sprung from the tradition of social scientific inquiry. *Reintroducing Ferdinand Tönnies* continues Adair-Totefl’s valuable work by exhibiting sensitivity to Tönnies’ intellectual legacy.

The aim of the book is to draw attention to the enduring value of Tönnies’ work and importance to the history of thought. Adair-Totefl pursues this aim by providing overviews of Tönnies’ writings—including several lesser-known works—and by offering intellectual historical context and interpretive pointers. The merit of this approach is that it serves to introduce Tönnies’ achievements whilst indicating ways that those achievements ramify through conceptual frameworks of Tönnies’ day and of our day. The work succeeds at demonstrating the strength of Tönnies’ commitment to developing the ideational core of sociology and to institutionalizing the discipline of sociology. The impressive quality of Tönnies’ mind is manifest across the pages of this work, as is the strength of Tönnies’ theoretical and analytical spirit.

Adair-Totefl covers a lot of terrain in just over 120 pages, yet the image he presents of Tönnies is striking and indelible: it is the image of a true original who advanced (as Tönnies himself put it in his preface to the 1887 edition of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*) a “new analysis of the fundamental problems of social life” and did so with theoretical ambition, epistemological precision, and sensitivity to major longstanding debates concerning the nature and sources of human action and interaction. The fact that Tönnies did such work whilst institutionalizing a new discipline is all the more memorable—and it is inspirational, too, at a moment when the social sciences appear to have lost theoretical ambition and an awareness of their place in conceptual history. In rendering this scale image of Tönnies, Adair-Totefl also attends to the finer details; this is perhaps most evident in his discussions of some of Tönnies’ major concepts, such as *Gemeinschaft*, *Gesellschaft*, *Wesenwille*, *Kürwille*, and *Sitte*. He presents the elements of Tönnies’ legacy in a manner that scholars can draw value from and that is inviting and accessible to the newcomer.

The book spans seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides a brief biographical overview of Tönnies’ life and career. Chapter 2 sets the intellectual context in which Tönnies was situated, and it focuses on three consequential thinkers in whom Tönnies found inspiration (namely, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Thomas Hobbes). Tönnies wrote books on both Marx and Hobbes as well as a pamphlet on Nietzsche. He gained renown for discovering several works by Hobbes, including *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, *Behemoth or the Long Parliament*, and dozens of Hobbes’ letters and some minor writings. Tönnies edited critical editions of the two monographs and published a series of four articles that reintroduced and reinterpreted Hobbes based on the newly reliable primary sources. Adair-Totefl addresses aspects of the thought of each of these thinkers that were salient to Tönnies and takes up the question of their influence on Tönnies. His discussion provides a guide to study and illuminates some of Tönnies’ preoccupations. The value of this contribution extends beyond its usefulness for understanding the roots and branches of Tönnies’ own intellectual development—it provides context concerning frameworks of thought out of which not only Tönnies’ theory but also sociology as such blossomed.

Chapter 3 provides a synopsis of the structure and argument of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* and addresses notable points concerning its publication history. This chapter functions as a primer for scholars unversed in that canonical work whilst exhibiting penetrating comprehension of Tönnies’ framework of thought that experts will find engaging. It illuminates the critical link between Tönnies’ theory of human will and the complementary theory of the forms of interaction of wills. In this way, the (oft-misunderstood)

relations between the concepts *Wesenwille*, *Kürwille*, *Gemeinschaft*, and *Gesellschaft* appear clearly. Set in context with the discussion of Tönnies' work on Hobbes, one envisions opportunities for future scholarship that investigates the relations and differences between notions common to both Hobbes and Tönnies (e.g. "natural law" and "will") or that considers the contributions of the work when read as a political philosophical treatise.

Adair-Totef's addresses another one of Tönnies' key ideas—*Sitte*—in Chapter 4. This chapter offers a rare, extended discussion of Tönnies' 1909 work *Die Sitte* and advances an interpretation of this work and its central concept that is compelling. The argument focuses on Tönnies' interlinking of practice, repetition, usage, and habit and the traces it leaves in "will" according to his broader theory. Adair-Totef's analysis hits the mark perfectly insofar as it both reintroduces one of Tönnies' seemingly minor texts and demonstrates its largely uninvestigated theoretical power. This analysis shows that Tönnies was at least as sensitive as Max Weber to the powers of habit and of custom in the emergence and maintenance of collective order and that he also recognized a marked distinction between these powers and those powers manifest in interactions of the *Gesellschaft* form. Another payoff of this discussion is a clearer view of the manner in which Tönnies articulates the several components of his theory with one another: to wit, he does so in such a way that there are explicit relations of modal dependence between the forms of will, forms of interaction of wills, and experience in the world. Adair-Totef brings the theoretical coherence of Tönnies' thought into focus and remarks upon important details. The discussion here is fresh, insightful, and timely, and it represents the theme of reintroduction magnificently. The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of the twenty-plus years Tönnies spent as a leading figure in the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie*.

Chapters 5 and 6 mainly engage work from later in Tönnies' half-century-long career. Adair-Totef structures these chapters around Tönnies' writings on war, public opinion, and the studies in sociology. The discussion of Tönnies' two books published at the height of the First World War is especially striking. Adair-Totef provides detailed overviews of *Der Englische Staat und der Deutsche Staat: Eine Studie* (1917) and *Weltkrieg und Völkerrecht* (1917). Adair-Totef throws into sharp relief Tönnies' comparative-historical sociological sensibility as well as his deep sensitivity to fundamental differences in the constitutive qualities of the English and German collectivities and the ways in which they manifest in the forms of their respective states, self-images of community, and notions of right. The Ferdinand Tönnies we meet here is a scholar's scholar engaged with public matters of the deepest importance. The discussion of Tönnies' works on public opinion and sociology calls out key notions and points of interest with helpful interpretive insight. The book concludes with a brief summative chapter.

Reintroducing Ferdinand Tönnies is a most welcome and timely volume. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the thought of Ferdinand Tönnies, the emergence of the social sciences, intellectual history, and social theory. It is an ideal text to include in courses in sociological theory and classical sociological thought, given its accessibility, clear layout, and map to the bounteous works of a great leading light. It is supported by an index of concepts, personages, and locales, and each chapter has its own Notes and References section. What is of especial value are the interpretive and contextual pointers offered by Adair-Totef and the judicious balance he strikes between surveying Tönnies' contributions from on high whilst attending to key details and nuanced points often overlooked. Adair-Totef's pointers offer just enough guidance to set scholars on the right track without presuming to offer the "final reading" or "last word" on Tönnies' rich body of ideas. This book serves as a stark reminder that Ferdinand Tönnies—a man whose ideas were key touchstones for Émile Durkheim and Max Weber—is hailed as one of sociology's founding fathers for very good reason. His influence on Hobbes' studies and contributions to the rethinking of what it means to speak of natural law reminds the contemporary social sciences that they were born out of a philosophical tradition whose frames of knowledge they carry on. Adair-Totef's book illuminates these frames as well as relations of intellectual filiation. Most importantly, it adeptly reintroduces us to Ferdinand Tönnies, an eminent scholar worthy of our continued attention.