The Concept of Community in Tönnies, Weber, and Plessner: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article comparatively examines the concept of community (Gemeinschaft) through the texts of Ferdinand Tönnies, Max Weber, and Helmuth Plessner. Utilising an epistemological framework grounded in critical realism and evolutionary epistemology, the study aims to conduct a comparative reading by reconstructing each of the three thinkers' understanding of community within their respective historical and epistemological contexts. The article examines in detail Tönnies's typology of community/society (Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft) based on the dichotomy of natural will and rational will; Weber's ideal types of communalization and sociation (Vergemeinschaftung/Vergesellschaftung) proposed within the framework of his meaning-centred theory of action, along with the position of market relations within these types; and Plessner's critique of community ethos and his concept of social radicalism, developed from the perspective of philosophical anthropology. The comparative analysis is conducted under the headings of ontological status, normative orientation, and diagnosis of modernity, thereby discussing the complementary and tension-ridden dimensions among the three thinkers. Ultimately, the article argues that this classical theoretical legacy continues to offer fruitful conceptual resources for analysing contemporary phenomena such as communitarianism, identity politics, populist movements, and digital communities.

Keywords: Community, Society, Social Radicalism, Philosophical Anthropology, Rationalisation

1. Introduction: The Return of the Community Debate

Over its roughly one-and-a-half-century trajectory, modern sociological theory has for the most part proceeded by placing society (Gesellschaft) at its centre. Post-Durkheimian sociology in particular conceptualised society as a self-referential whole possessing its own internal normative and functional integrity, and redefined the tension between individual and society from within this totality. Against such a backdrop, the concept of "community" (Gemeinschaft) has tended to be reduced either to a nostalgic image of the past or to a dangerous political project. In parallel, the

concept of community has become the linguistic vehicle of both conservative-agrarian discourses and totalitarian projects, so that its constitutive complexity has been obscured beneath a fog of ideological association.

Yet when the texts of Ferdinand Tönnies, Max Weber, and Helmuth Plessner are read together, it becomes considerably clearer that community is not merely a historical social form or an ideological symbol, but one of the fundamental ways in which human beings grasp their relations to themselves, to others, and to institutions. For all three authors, community functions, albeit on different planes, as both a descriptive category and a critical instrument. In Tönnies, community is a type of reality that corresponds to a particular form of will and has taken concrete historical shapes. In Weber, communalization (Vergemeinschaftung) becomes an ideal-typical pole representing a particular orientation of meaningful social action. In Plessner, by contrast, community ethos is a critical concept used to expose the dangerous forms of social radicalism that disregard the anthropological structure of the human being.

The primary aim of this article is to reconstruct the conceptions of community held by Tönnies, Weber, and Plessner, together with their historical contexts and epistemological premises, and subsequently to place them in conversation with one another through a comparative reading. In doing so, the article seeks to establish a productive conceptual ground both for narratives of the dissolution of modernity and rationalisation, and for current debates surrounding communitarianism, identity politics, and populist movements. Indeed, the "search for community" that we encounter today in various contexts—new-right movements, religious and national identity politics, digital communities, activist networks—is directly related to the problems discussed in these classical texts. Reading the works of these three authors together allows us to better understand under what conditions the desire for "belonging" and "closeness" constitutes relations of solidarity and meaning, and under what conditions it instead becomes material for exclusionary, violence-prone, and authoritarian projects.

The first section briefly discusses the article's epistemological and methodological framework. Organised chiefly around the concepts of critical realism and evolutionary epistemology, this framework aims to address how we might use abstract categories such as community and society, and how we might understand the claims to reality that these categories carry. The second section examines the scheme of natural will (Wesenwille) and rational will

(Kürwille) at the heart of Tönnies's community/society distinction, and how this scheme is concretised through different types of community. The third section is devoted to Weber's dichotomy of communalization (Vergemeinschaftung) and sociation (Vergesellschaftung), explaining, in particular, the historical development of Weber's concepts and the position of phenomena such as the market, money, and ethnicity within this dichotomy. The fourth section examines Plessner's critique of community ethos and social radicalism in detail within the context of philosophical anthropology. In the final section, the three authors' conceptions of community are compared in terms of ontological status, normative orientation, and diagnosis of modernity, and their significance for contemporary debates is discussed.

2. Epistemological and Methodological Framework

Comparing the conceptions of community held by three different thinkers does not simply mean placing three separate sets of concepts side by side. Each of these thinkers' epistemology, methodological orientation, and conception of the human being constitutes the background that shapes their understanding of community. These understandings are therefore not merely descriptive; they are also expressions of a particular worldview, a particular conception of the human being, and a particular political stance. For this reason, it is first necessary, however briefly, to clarify the epistemological and methodological position adopted in this article.

This position is shaped around two main axes: critical realism and evolutionary epistemology. Critical realism is an approach that seeks to distance itself both from the naïve realism that claims the natural and social world to be an unreachable "thing-in-itself" wholly independent of human conceptual schemes, and from the radical constructivism that reduces all reality to linguistic constructions (Bhaskar, 1978, pp. 21–25; Archer, 1995, pp. 1–15). The basic premise of this approach is that the world possesses a depth irreducible to human knowledge, yet human knowledge can genuinely make contact with this depth from certain angles. Concepts such as community and society thus point, on the one hand, to particular historical experiences, particular forms of relation, and particular material conditions, while on the other hand functioning as theoretical instruments used in the effort to grasp these experiences through abstraction.

Within this framework, Tönnies's community/society distinction, Weber's communalization/sociation dichotomy, and Plessner's concept of community ethos should be understood as schemes that do not fully coincide with one another and that operate at partially

different levels of abstraction. In other words, these concepts can be thought of as different lenses trained on the same phenomena. For this reason, the article does not treat any single author's conceptual scheme as the final word; rather, it interrogates each one's capacity to render a particular layer of reality visible, as well as its blind spots. This allows us to see more clearly how the concept of community acquires different meanings at different levels—economic relations, emotional bonds, political projects, anthropological necessities.

Evolutionary epistemology, in turn, rests on the assumption that knowledge and concepts can also be understood as a kind of adaptive strategy (Campbell, 1974, pp. 413–414). As the human species strives to adapt to the world through its biological equipment, cognitive architecture, and historical experience, it produces not only descriptive knowledge but also constructs normative orientations and values. From this perspective, the concept of community is not merely a neutral term denoting particular social forms that existed in the past; it is also a symbol that human beings use to make sense of, glorify, or condemn their own relationships. Community therefore carries within it claims about both what "is" and what "ought to be." Viewed from the perspective of evolutionary epistemology, the nostalgic tone of Tönnies's depictions of community, the tragic-pluralist structure of Weber's ideal-typical concepts, and the normative intensity of Plessner's critique of communitarianism can all be read as different strategies through which the human species regulates itself and its relationships.

The combined use of critical realism and evolutionary epistemology performs two important functions in this article. The first is to emphasise that concepts such as community and society are not entirely arbitrary labels that vary endlessly with context, but rather rest on particular historical and material realities. The difference between rural kinship networks and global financial markets, for instance, is not merely a linguistic difference but also a material and institutional one. The second function is to remind us that these concepts never directly reflect pure reality in an unmediated way, but always carry a particular selectivity, emphasis, and normative charge. This makes it possible to discuss the differences among Tönnies, Weber, and Plessner not in terms of who is "right," but in terms of who renders which layer of reality visible, to what extent, and at what cost.

Methodologically, this article undertakes a comparative textual analysis. All three authors wrote within their own contexts and from distinct disciplinary positions: Tönnies stands

somewhere between sociology and political philosophy; Weber, between historical-sociological analysis and methodological theory; and Plessner, between philosophical anthropology and political philosophy. Reading these texts simply as sociological theories, or merely as political manifestos, may therefore be misleading. It is accordingly important to take each author seriously within his own context while also maintaining sufficient critical distance to rethink his concepts for the present.

3. Ferdinand Tönnies: Forms of Will in the Context of Community and Society

Tönnies's Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft, published in 1887, is the foundational text that established the community/society distinction in modern sociology and subsequently gave rise to a great many debates (Tönnies, 2020). The historical context in which the work was written was one of profound social transformation. Germany's belated process of nation-formation, rapid industrialisation, rural-to-urban migration, demographic mobility, the dissolution of traditional forms of authority, and the emergence of new class structures all form the backdrop to Tönnies's conceptual endeavour (Nisbet, 1970, pp. 71–73). In this context, community and society function both as instruments of social diagnosis and, to a certain extent, as a form of cultural critique.

Tönnies examined human relationships based on mutual affirmation through the concepts of community and society. In his view, human relationships are "understood either as real and organic life, which is the nature of community (Gemeinschaft), or as an ideational (ideell) and mechanical formation, which is the concept of society (Gesellschaft)" (Tönnies, 2020, p. 41). Accordingly, community, as in a family, is understood as real and organic life—the essential form of unity—whereas society is merely a concept, a relation among free individuals such as the inhabitants of a city acting in pursuit of their own rational interests. Community is defined as a real and living union, whereas society is defined as an ideational and mechanical mechanism. Community is positioned as "an intimate, exclusively shared life," and society as "public life, the world at large": a person is born into their community, whereas one enters society "as one goes into a foreign land" (Tönnies, 2020, pp. 41–43).

Tönnies grounds this ontological distinction in two forms of will: natural will (Wesenwille) and rational will (Kürwille). Natural will is the will of self-purposive associations operating through identification and belonging, whereas rational will refers to bonds established through calculation, the separation of means and ends, and individual interest (Tönnies, 2020, pp. 129–

135). Natural will is characterised by the individual's feeling of being bound to a root, a lineage, a place, a tradition, or a shared way of life. In this form of will, the individual acts not only to attain particular external outcomes but also to sustain the relationship itself. In Tönnies's terms, what is decisive here is the intrinsic value of being a "we." Rational will, by contrast, is the will by which the individual calculates means to attain particular ends, weighs benefits and costs, and seeks to maximise self-interest. In the form of rational will, relations established with other people generally take on the character of a means directed towards external ends. According to Tönnies, the relationship between a merchant and a customer, an employer and an employee, or a modern bureaucrat and a citizen are, for the most part, examples of relations shaped by rational will (Tönnies, 2020, p. 149 ff.).

According to Tönnies, natural will manifests itself through three basic forms: pleasure, habit, and memory (Tönnies, 2020, pp. 135–143). Pleasure relates to bodily and emotional attraction; habit, to recurring shared practices; and memory, to the emotional residue of past shared experiences. Together, this triad forms the psychological infrastructure of the communal bond.

Rational will, by contrast, is a will directed towards ends under the dominance of thought. Tönnies distinguishes the forms of rational will as deliberation (thinking oriented towards choice), decision (preference oriented towards particular actions), and concept (thought oriented towards itself) (Tönnies, 2020, pp. 149–153). Natural will is thus grasped by analogy with organic life, and rational will by analogy with mechanical instruments (Tönnies, 2020, pp. 171–174).

The social forms in which these two types of will predominate are expressed through the concepts of community and society (Tönnies, 2020, p. 208). Community is a totality of relations in which natural will predominates and in which people are bound to one another spontaneously, and often by bonds present from birth (Tönnies, 2020, p. 49). In such relations, a shared past, shared fate, shared beliefs, and traditions are decisive (Tönnies, 2020, p. 55). Society, by contrast, is a world in which rational will predominates and in which individuals, pursuing their own interests, enter into relations with one another through contracts and legal arrangements. Here, association is generally defined through obligatory cooperation and a community of interest (Tönnies, 2020, p. 95).

To further elucidate the content of community, Tönnies distinguishes three basic types of community. The first is a community based on blood or kinship ties (Blutsgemeinschaft).

Examples of this type include the family, lineage, clan, extended kinship networks, household structures persisting across generations, and their associated economic organisations (Tönnies, 2020, p. 56). Within the community of blood, the individual conceives of themselves primarily as a link in a chain of lineage. Authority here rests chiefly on age and lineage hierarchy; the head of the household, the council of elders, and the figure of the ancestor are the bearers of the intergenerational order. The normative fabric of this community is organised around categories such as family honour, ancestral heritage, and lineage name.

The second type of community is community based on place (Ortsgemeinschaft). When people begin living in the same village, neighbourhood, or small town, a strong sense of communal place develops through the continual encounters generated by shared use of space and through practices of mutual acquaintance and mutual observation. This type of community is especially pronounced in Tönnies's depictions of rural Germany (Tönnies, 2020, p. 56). The village square, the marketplace, the village church, the coffee house, and the shops of the street and neighbourhood do not merely serve economic functions; they are also places where people acquire knowledge of one another's lives, and where reputation and trust are constructed. Authority here rests not only on age but also on local power relations, economic standing, craft skill, and religious or cultural prestige.

The third type of community is the community of mind or spirit (Geistesgemeinschaft). Faith communities, religious orders, ideological groups, and circles of friendship and small communities that come together around a particular purpose or way of life fall into this category. In this type of community, the bond is formed not through biological or spatial ties but through shared meanings, values, and ideals. Tönnies therefore places particular emphasis here on the category of "understanding" (Verständnis): people are together because they make sense of themselves, of others, and of the world in similar ways (Tönnies, 2020, p. 249). This is significant for explaining how new searches for community can emerge, particularly in modern settings where bonds of blood and place have weakened.

One of the notable aspects of Tönnies's conception of community is his emphasis that community does not consist merely of warmth and closeness but also of distinct authority and hierarchy. Tönnies discusses the forms of authority within the community through various combinations based on age, power, wisdom, and position (König, 1955, pp. 348–420). Paternal

authority within the family, for example, draws not only on physical strength but also on traditional roles and religious or cultural symbols. Local leaders within the village hold a certain position of leadership in the economic, religious, and cultural domains alike. Community, therefore, unlike the ideals of modern legal equality, is built upon de facto inequalities and hierarchies; yet these hierarchies are not perceived as a problem so long as they are regarded as legitimate and sincerely accepted by the community's members.

The emotional foundation of the communal bond is expressed, in Tönnies, through the concepts of love (Liebe) and respect (Achtung). Love encompasses feelings of closeness, affection, and belonging, while respect denotes distance, reverence, and the acceptance of authority (Tönnies, 2020, p. 54). These two sentiments together make possible both the intimacy and the order of community. A bond based on love alone may render hierarchy invisible, while a bond based on respect alone leads to a loss of emotional warmth. According to Tönnies, community acquires a stable structure when these two dimensions are combined in balance (Tönnies, 2020, p. 54).

Decision-making and collective action within community take place on a foundation that Tönnies calls "concord" (Übereinstimmung). This concord does not rest on contracts explicitly formulated, negotiated, and set down in writing, as in modern law. It operates, rather, through the tacit acceptance of shared values and traditions that everyone regards as natural and right. In rural communities, practices such as price-setting, the division of labour, mutual aid, weddings, funerals, and hospitality are areas in which this kind of tacit concord takes concrete form (Tönnies, 2020, p. 62). This tacit concord strengthens social solidarity on the one hand, but it can also, on the other hand, produce an effect that resists change and suppresses difference.

With the concept of society, Tönnies analyses the typical form of modern capitalist society. In the world of society, people are connected to one another no longer primarily through lineage, place, or tradition, but through the division of labour, specialisation, contract, and monetary relations (Tönnies, 2020, p. 83). Exchange and contract form the core of societal relations. Money, by converting different goods and services into a common measure, abstracts relations and detaches them from personal bonds. As Georg Simmel (1989 [1900]) discusses in detail in The Philosophy of Money, the money economy both increases individual freedom and the possibilities of choice, and tends to dissolve relations into superficial, quantitative comparisons.

In society, the individual generally experiences themselves as an actor, entering into relations with others through roles such as customer, worker, employer, official, and citizen. The content of these roles is determined largely by legal regulations, contracts, market rules, and bureaucratic hierarchies. The individual thereby gains, on the one hand, a broad sphere of freedom and mobility, but may, on the other hand, lose in their relationships the emotional intensity and depth of meaning that community offers. Tönnies regards this as a kind of dissolution: the warm and close bonds of community are replaced by cold, calculating, and transient bonds. The consequences of this dissolution for the individual are depicted as feelings of alienation, loneliness, and rootlessness (Nisbet, 1970, pp. 71–82).

It should be emphasised at this point that Tönnies conceives of community and society not merely as a historical succession, but also as interwoven forms of relation capable of coexisting simultaneously. A person living in a modern city forms community-type relations with their family, friends, and faith groups, while being incorporated, largely, into society-type patterns of relation at work, in the market, and in their dealings with state institutions. Nevertheless, the general tendency in Tönnies's narrative is towards the dissolution of community and the increasing dominance of society. Although this tendency lends the text a nostalgic tone, it also performs an analytical function that renders visible the costs of modernisation (Cahnman, 1976, p. 841).

4. Max Weber: Communalization and Sociation

Max Weber's understanding of community and society both continues the path opened by Ferdinand Tönnies and radicalises it in significant respects. Weber read Tönnies closely, took his conceptual apparatus seriously, and at certain points engaged directly with him in debate (Breuer, 1996, pp. 227–228; Cahnman, 1973, pp. 259–261). Weber's analysis, however, reconstructs Tönnies's will-based typology within the framework of a meaning-centred theory of action. For this reason, community and society in Weber become not empirical facts but ideal-typical concepts expressing different meaning-configurations of social action.

The point of departure for Weber's sociology is the concept of understanding (Verstehen). For Weber, sociology is a science that seeks to understand social action interpretively (deutend verstehen) and to explain it causally in its course and effects (ursächlich erklären) (Weber, 1922, p. 16). To understand any social relationship, therefore, one must grasp not what the actors do, but the subjective meaning they attach to what they do. This approach also applies to community and

society: what matters is the framework of meaning within which forms of relation that appear similar from the outside are actually lived by the actors involved.

In his well-known classification, Weber distinguishes four basic types of action: instrumentally rational (zweckrational), value-rational (wertrational), affectual (affektuell), and traditional (traditional) (Weber, 1922, p. 7). Instrumentally rational action is action performed by calculating the appropriate means to achieve particular goals and by weighing the consequences. In value-rational action, what is decisive, independently of consequences, is fidelity to a value—for example, a religious commandment, a moral principle, or an aesthetic ideal. Affectual action is action driven by intense emotional states such as anger, love, or fear. Traditional action, finally, is the almost reflexive continuation of habits and customs.

According to Weber, a social relationship arises when the actions of at least two people are meaningfully oriented towards one another's conduct, and when this orientation displays a certain continuity. "A social relationship consists of behaviour, of several people, which is reciprocally oriented towards, and mutually determined by, its meaningful content" (Weber, 1922, p. 29). In other words, a social relationship exists when actions mutually take one another into account. In Weber's terminology, depending on the meaning-configuration involved, this relationship may take the form of either "communalization" (Vergemeinschaftung) or "sociation" (Vergesellschaftung) (Weber, 1972, pp. 21–22).

Weber defines communalization as a form of social relationship based on a subjectively felt sense of togetherness on the part of the parties involved. This sense of togetherness may be built upon elements such as brotherhood, friendship, comradeship, shared fate, traditional belonging, or sacrifice for the sake of shared values. What is decisive here is that the relationship is experienced by the parties as a "we," and that this state of "we-ness" is itself regarded as valuable. Weber's examples include the family, groups of friends, religious communities, certain ethnic unions, and, at times, even gang-like structures (Weber, 1972, pp. 21–22). Affectual and traditional motivations often play a decisive role in such relationships, although value-rational commitment, too, can be an important element of communalization.

Sociation, by contrast, refers to a form of social relationship based on the rational calculation of interests, the reconciliation of interests, and formal arrangements between the parties. Employment contracts, business partnerships, market relations, bureaucratic organisations, and

law are among Weber's examples of sociation (Weber, 1972, pp. 21–22). In such relations, the parties apprehend one another primarily through their roles and positions; what binds them derives from legal and institutional arrangements rather than from personal loyalty. Sociation is therefore a form of relationship in which instrumentally rational, and in some cases value-rational, action predominates.

Although Weber's definitions in his major work Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (Weber, 1922) may appear at first glance similar to Tönnies's community/society distinction, there are important differences between them. First, Weber deliberately constructs his ideal types through one-sided emphases and explicitly states that they are not found as rigid distinctions in actual life (Weber, 1922, p. 24). Real social relationships very often carry elements of both communalization and sociation together. In a family—a paradigmatic example of communalization—calculations of interest, arrangements concerning inheritance and property, or legal statuses may be significant; conversely, within a large corporation—a typical example of sociation—people who work together for years may develop emotional solidarity, friendship, and even a sense of being like family. For Weber, therefore, community and society are never two essential, immutable worlds, but rather analytical poles—conceptual centres of gravity that facilitate thought.

Second, Weber does not directly tie the community/society distinction to a scheme of historical evolution. He certainly characterises modernity by the process of rationalisation, bureaucratisation, and the spread of the market economy, processes that lead to the proliferation of sociation. This does not mean, however, that communalization disappears. On the contrary, powerful dynamics of communalization persist in modern society: the sentiments of national unity generated by nation-states, political movements formed around charismatic leadership, ethnic identity politics, religious revivals, and even contemporary social movements all sustain different patterns of communalization (Breuer, 1993, pp. 211–213; Schluchter, 1996, pp. 223–255). For Weber, the question is in which domains, with what intensity, and with what consequences communalization and sociation each arise.

Klaus Lichtblau (2000), who examines the evolution of Weber's concepts of community and society, draws attention to the conceptual adjustments that Weber made over time, particularly regarding market and monetary relations. In an early text, the so-called "Kategorienaufsatz," Weber draws a threefold distinction between communal action (Gemeinschaftshandeln),

consensual action (Einverständnishandeln), and societal action (Gesellschaftshandeln), and classifies the use of money, price bargaining, and market exchange under the category of consensual communalization (Einverständnisvergemeinschaftung) (Weber, 1922a, pp. 417–440). Here, even the monetary relation is regarded as a form of communalization, because the parties act as though an agreed-upon order existed, taking into account the anticipated behaviour of potential third parties.

Within this framework, Weber speaks of the use of money by virtue of communalization (Geldgebrauch kraft Vergemeinschaftung) and even of a "market community" (Marktgemeinschaft) (Weber, 1972, p. 382; Lichtblau, 2000, pp. 438–441). That is, although the market, in being impersonal and lacking face-to-face relations, resembles Tönnies's depiction of society, Weber conceptualises the market as a form of communalization, since it constitutes an order of concord that coordinates actors' mutual expectations and calculations. From Tönnies's point of view, this is an almost paradoxical situation: the world of the market, which Tönnies would call "market society" (Marktgesellschaft), is termed by Weber a "market community" (Marktgemeinschaft). This difference clearly shows on what criteria the two thinkers base their community/society distinction: for Tönnies, what is decisive is the character of the will and the intensity of the emotional/moral bond, whereas for Weber, what is decisive is the subjective structure of meaning of the action and the mechanisms of mutual expectation.

With Weber's later redefinition of his concepts—particularly in the final version of Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft—market and monetary relations are placed no longer under communalization (Vergemeinschaftung) but under the category of rational sociation (Vergesellschaftung) (Weber, 1922, pp. 21–22). Here, Weber emphasises that the market rests on the rational reconciliation of interests and is regulated through legal and institutional frameworks, and should therefore be understood as a sociated form of relationship. According to Lichtblau (2000, pp. 427–428), this revision stems from Weber's need to anchor market relations more consistently within the narrative of rationalisation. Communalization is thus more clearly assigned to forms of relationship dominated by affectual, traditional, and value-rational orientations, while sociation is assigned to instrumentally rational forms of relationship dominated by rational calculations of interest.

Another important concept in Weber's conceptual scheme is the Grenzfall, the boundary or limiting case. Ideal types, for Weber, are never exact replicas of reality; they are conceptual

instruments constructed through the conscious, one-sided emphasis of certain aspects of reality (Zeybekoğlu, 2026, p. 36). The power of these instruments becomes apparent precisely when they are tested against phenomena that do not fit neatly into the type and appear as anomalies. The dynamics of the market that carry elements of both communalization and sociation at once—for instance, the solidarity that develops among tradesmen, guild-like organisations, and codes of professional honour—are intertwined with rational reconciliations of interest; such mixed cases test the explanatory limits of the community/society ideal types. Taking such boundary cases into account, Weber keeps his concepts flexible and revises them as necessary (Lichtblau, 2000, pp. 428–429, 440–441).

Another important contribution of Weber's is the concept of overarching communalization (übergreifende Vergemeinschaftung), which emphasises the permeability between communalization and sociation. In an example given in one of the older sections of Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, Weber describes how a bowling club, originally established solely for a specific purpose, gradually develops among its members a sense of emotional fraternity and friendship. This association, initially formed as a rational sociation, over time generates an overarching communalization upon itself; membership comes to exceed a mere association for entertainment or interest and becomes the bearer of personal reputation, loyalty, and value judgements concerning the whole person (Weber, 1972, p. 237). The same dynamic can be observed in the process by which the bond of citizenship in modern nation-states gradually transforms into a powerful sense of national community.

The examples Weber examines in relation to ethnic communal relations are instructive in this regard. Ethnic unity, according to Weber, rests for the most part on a belief in common ethnic membership constructed through myths of shared origin, language, religion, and historical narrative (Weber, 1922, pp. 267–268). When this belief becomes intertwined with political and economic communities of interest, it both produces a powerful sense of communalization and can bend the rational, legal functioning of sociated institutions in particular directions. Modern nations, in this respect, are hybrid forms in which communalization and sociation are intensely intertwined.

In sum, Weber regards communalization and sociation not as two mutually exclusive closed boxes, but as ideal types that are intertwined in many concrete relationships and separable only at the analytical level. This approach transposes Tönnies's more historical and partly normative

dichotomy onto a more flexible, processual, and pluralistic conceptual plane. Weber's tragic diagnosis of modernity also acquires its meaning within this framework: while processes of rationalisation display a historical tendency in favour of instrumentally rational action and sociated institutions, they do not entirely eliminate the human search for meaning, value, and community; rather, they may redirect this search into new, and at times more dangerous, forms (Weber, 1922, pp. 140–142; 1922a, pp. 203–204).

5. Helmuth Plessner: The Limits of Community Ethos and Social Radicalism

When Helmuth Plessner's (2024 [1924]) The Limits of Community was published in 1924, Weimar Republic Germany was in the grip of a profound political, social, and cultural crisis. Defeat in the First World War, the harsh conditions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, economic crises, hyperinflation, unemployment, political violence, and polarisation had produced a widespread build-up of disillusionment and anger among broad segments of the population (Oexle, 1994, pp. 115–125). The experience of parliamentary democracy appeared, to many, both fragile and inauthentic. In this environment, the discourse of community became a widely shared point of attraction across different political camps. Radical movements of the right and the left alike targeted the representative, distanced, and bureaucratic world of institutional democracy, calling for the reconstitution of an authentic community—of the nation, the class, or the faith community.

Plessner's book can be read as a sharp critique directed at this discourse of community. Yet the work is no ordinary political polemic. Proceeding from the perspective of philosophical anthropology, Plessner analyses the structural characteristics of the human being and seeks to show why, given these characteristics, pure ideals of community are both anthropologically impossible and politically dangerous (Plessner, 2024, pp. 57–60).

At the centre of Plessner's anthropology lies the concept of "eccentric positionality" (exzentrische Positionalität) (Plessner, 1928/1975, pp. 393–396). The human being, while living within their own body from the inside, is at the same time a being capable of looking at their own body, feelings, and actions from the outside, capable of objectifying themselves. That is, the human being both experiences themselves as an "I" and can possess an "I" that observes that "I." This dual position necessarily creates a distance, a self-alienation, and hence a space of play, mask, and role. For Plessner, a state of wholly direct, unmediated, transparent sincerity is not possible for the

human being; the human being is always a being who partly performs, partly displays, and partly conceals (Plessner, 2024, pp. 74–76).

This anthropological structure also manifests itself in the forms of social life. Society (Gesellschaft), for Plessner, is not merely the domain of interest relations, but also an institutional and symbolic framework that safeguards this eccentric structure. Legal rules, norms of manners and courtesy, the representative structures of institutions, social roles, titles, rituals, and forms of ceremony enable people to live together without being forced to open their inner selves directly to one another (Plessner, 2024, pp. 81–88, 97). These elements are, in a sense, social masks; but Plessner does not use the notion of masks in a negative sense. On the contrary, masks are necessary equipment that protects the human being's vulnerable, fragile, conflict-ridden inner world, regulates relations, and makes distance possible.

Plessner expresses this state of affairs through the concept of "de-realisation" (Irrealisieren). The human being is obliged to a certain degree to de-realise both themselves and their relationships—that is, to raise them to the level of representation (Plessner, 2024, pp. 13–14, 83–86). The robe a judge wears in the courtroom, for example, represents not the full range of their personal qualities but a particular role; through this, their decisions are expected to be guided by legal norms rather than by personal grudges and passions. Similarly, rules of etiquette enable people to remain within certain bounds without allowing the tensions between them to erupt into the open. Such forms of representation and masking are necessary complements to the human being's eccentric structure.

It is precisely at this point that the type of social radicalism targeted by Plessner emerges. Social radicalism is a mode of thought that rejects the human being's need for mask and distance, condemns all mediating institutions as alienation and hypocrisy, and pursues an ideal of total sincerity and directness. According to Plessner, this mode of thought, in both its right-wing and left-wing versions, was powerful in Weimar Germany (Plessner, 2024, p. 38). Radical right-wing communitarianism glorifies the nation, race, blood, or lineage as a natural and unalterable unity, regarding the individual as merely a limb of this whole (Plessner, 2024, pp. 49–50). Radical left-wing communitarianism, meanwhile, absolutises class, revolution, or a particular political cause, demanding that the individual dedicate their entire identity to this cause (Plessner, 2024, pp. 38–

39). In both cases, what is common is a suspicion of, and hostility towards, institutional distance, legal forms, representative structures, and the individual's right of withdrawal.

To analyse this radicalism, Plessner distinguishes two types of community ethos. The first is the ethos of the community of blood (Gemeinschaftsethos des Blutes). This ethos reduces the individual to an inborn, unalterable, unquestionable bond—of lineage, race, nation, or family. Membership is experienced not as a chosen identity but as fate. In the ethos of the blood community, difference and individual autonomy are largely suppressed in favour of loyalty to one's origin. Categories such as honour, pride, loyalty, betrayal, and chastity constitute the moral universe of this community ethos (Plessner, 2024, pp. 49–50, 52–53, 60–62). Certain forms of modern nationalism and racism can be read as movements that politicise this ethos to an extreme degree.

The second is the ethos of the community of the cause (Gemeinschaftsethos der Sache). Here, community rests not on blood but on the cause (Sache): individuals are expected to display complete and unconditional devotion to great ideals such as revolution, truth, God, the nation, class, or the faith community (Plessner, 2024, pp. 60–61). In such communities, half-hearted commitments, critical distance, and individual doubts are not tolerated, and are often equated with betrayal. Plessner reads this ethos as a kind of inverted aristocratic or confessional morality: nobility is now tied not to lineage but to loyalty to the cause; the true member is one who can identify themselves completely with the cause (Plessner, 2024, pp. 38–39). In this context, totalitarian movements can be seen as extreme forms of communities of the cause.

According to Plessner, both types of community ethos carry the potential to turn into a totalising and violence-prone social radicalism once they disregard the human being's eccentric structure and their need for mask and distance. Communitarianism emerges with the promise of restoring to people the sense of meaning, belonging, and warmth they have lost; but in order to fulfil this promise, it is prepared to sacrifice individual differences, the private sphere, critical reason, and institutional checks. For Plessner, this constitutes a serious threat to the anthropological needs of the human being (Plessner, 2024, pp. 38–39).

For this reason, Plessner argues that setting limits to community is a normative task (Plessner, 2024, pp. 38–39). This limitation does not mean rejecting the experience of community altogether, for the human being is anthropologically dependent on forms of communalization such as family,

friendship, small groups, and local ties. It does, however, contain a sharp warning against the absolutisation of community as a political project—that is, against communitarianism (Plessner, 2024, pp. 59–60). Plessner defends society's representative institutions, its legal forms, the distinction between the public and private spheres, and the legitimacy of personal masks and roles. In his view, these elements perform the function of a protective shell for the human being's fragile inner world, forming a barrier against brute force, the compulsion towards directness, and violence (Plessner, 2024, p. 83).

Viewed in this light, Plessner's text is not merely a critique directed against the forms of radical communitarianism found in Weimar Germany; it is also a defence of the fragile yet indispensable elements of the modern liberal-democratic order. The value of institutional distance, the abstractness of law, representative institutions, official roles, and masks can only be fully understood once the threat of communitarianism is taken into account. This constitutes an important warning for today's identity politics, populist movements, and new communitarian discourses grounded in ideals of transparency.

6. Comparative Reading: Juxtaposing Three Conceptions of Community

When the texts of Tönnies, Weber, and Plessner are read together, three distinct yet mutually articulable dimensions of the concept of community come to light: first, the grasping of community as a will-based, historical-typological form; second, the understanding of communalization as a meaning-centred, ideal-typical orientation of action; and third, the critique of community ethos as a form of political radicalism that misreads the human being's anthropological structure.

In terms of ontological status, Tönnies constructs community and society as two basic forms of social reality. These forms are structures that can exist partly in historical succession and partly simultaneously (Nisbet, 1970, pp. 74–75). Community is the typical form of the traditional world, dominated by rural, kinship-based, and local ties; society is the form of the modern world, dominated by industrialisation, urbanisation, and the market economy. Tönnies narrates the transition from community to society not as a straightforward progress or regress, but as a pronounced story of dissolution and transformation, in which community is depicted as a richer, warmer, and morally more intense world (Tönnies, 2020, pp. 42–43).

Weber, by contrast, defines communalization and sociation as ideal-typical poles that diverge according to the meaning-orientations of social relations. These concepts are pure models that Weber uses to analytically dissect the mixed forms of relation found in reality (Weber, 1922, p. 24). In Weber, therefore, no relationship is defined as purely communalized or purely sociated; each is positioned at varying degrees between these two poles. A modern nation-state, for example, is a strong instance of sociation with respect to its legal-bureaucratic structures, while it produces intense communalization with respect to its discourses of national identity and shared history. This flexibility allows Weber to conceive of modernity as a process encompassing both rationalisation and charismatic-collective enthusiasm (Breuer, 1993, pp. 209–213; Schluchter, 1996, pp. 42–43, 168–170).

In Plessner, community is above all an anthropological and political figure (Plessner, 2024, pp. 137, 140). The human being is a being that needs the experience of community; yet the pure ideal of community is incompatible with the human being's eccentric structure. When this ideal appears in the discourse of social radicalisms as a rejection of the need for mask, distance, and representation, it produces politically dangerous consequences (Plessner, 2024, pp. 11, 56). Plessner's conception of community is therefore shaped, largely with a negative emphasis, through a critique of communitarianism. Society—that is, the legal-institutional framework—here takes the stage as a value that must be protected.

At the normative level, we encounter a pronounced nostalgic tone in Tönnies's narrative. Community lends itself to idealisation as a universe dominated by love, respect, mutual recognition, solidarity, and a shared world of meaning. Society, by contrast, is depicted as a world dominated by cold, calculating, superficial, and transient relations, in which people instrumentalise one another. Although Tönnies attempts to present his work as a scientific sociological text, the emotional intensity that pervades his depictions of community, in particular, is generally read as a sign of an implicit normative preference in favour of community.

Weber's stance is more ambivalent and tragic. Communalized relations provide people with meaning, closeness, identity, and value experience, but they also play an important role in legitimising traditional and charismatic forms of authority. Sociation brings legal equality, predictability, and rational coordination, while confining the individual within networks of bureaucratic control; Weber's metaphor of the "iron cage" (stahlhartes Gehäuse) describes this

condition (Weber, 1922a, p. 203). Weber refrains from establishing a clear moral hierarchy between these two dimensions, viewing them instead as the structural tensions of modernity (Schluchter, 1996, pp. 7–15). In this respect, his sociology can be read less as a narrative of loss than as a narrative of conflicting rationalities.

In Plessner, the normative emphasis lies distinctly in favour of society and law. Communitarianism becomes attractive by appealing to the feelings of loneliness, insecurity, and loss of meaning produced by modernity; yet, according to Plessner, while it offers short-term consolation, it leads to more destructive consequences in the long run. The ethics of the communities of blood and of the cause can readily turn into exclusionary, totalising, and violence-prone structures (Plessner, 1924, pp. 58–62). Plessner therefore critiques not community but communitarianism. What he defends is distanced publicness, the abstractness of law, the mediation of representative institutions, and the legitimacy of individual masks and roles. These elements are barriers that protect the human being's fragile inner world from the pressure of communitarianism.

Significant differences also exist among the three thinkers with respect to their understanding of will and motivation. Tönnies ties types of relationship directly to two modes of will: Wesenwille and Kürwille. Community is the product of natural will, and society the product of rational will (Tönnies, 1924, p. 167). This is also connected to a typology of character: the figures of communal man and societal man carry different moral and psychological characteristics. Weber, by contrast, classifies motivations through categories of meaning; communalization and sociation are located not in the essence of the will but in the subjective meaning of the action (Weber, 1922, pp. 21–22). The same individual may display different types of action and forms of relationship in different contexts; what is at issue, therefore, is not fixed character types but multiple sets of roles and meanings. Plessner, finally, focuses less on motivation than on the general mode of human existence; communitarianism is assessed as a radicalisation of the will, an extremity that rejects the human being's need for mask and distance (Plessner, 1924, p. 20).

As for diagnoses of modernity, Tönnies depicts modernity as the dissolution of community and the ascendancy of society. Industrialisation, urbanisation, the division of labour, the market economy, and legal-rational forms of authority weaken relations of the communal type, replacing them with abstract relations based on calculations of interest (Tönnies, 1924, p. 19; Nisbet, 1970,

pp. 73–74). While this process, on the one hand, increases individual liberation and mobility, it also, on the other hand, nourishes feelings of rootlessness, loneliness, and alienation.

Weber reads modernity as a process of rationalisation (Zeybekoğlu, 2026, p. 104). This process produces profound effects not only in the economy but also in the domains of law, administration, science, and religion (Assel, 1969, p. 199; Schöllgen, 1979, p. 33). Instrumentally rational action, bureaucratic organisation, calculability, technical control, and predictability are the basic characteristics of the modern world. In this context, sociation forms the institutional backbone of modernity. Weber, however, also exposes the communalizing dynamics of modernity through phenomena such as cults of charismatic leadership, myths of national unity, and religious and ethnic movements (Breuer, 1993, pp. 212–215). Modernity thus appears as a complex process that both diminishes communalization and produces new forms of community.

Plessner, for his part, assesses modernity as an order that seeks to protect the human being's eccentric position through institutional distance, legal forms, and representative structures. The loneliness and loss of meaning produced by modernity certainly justify its critique; but according to Plessner, this critique should proceed not in the direction of communitarianism, but towards the democratisation of institutions, the broadening of the inclusiveness of law, and the strengthening of representative structures (Plessner, 2024, pp. 114–115). Otherwise, communitarianism, while presenting itself as a critique of modernity, creates an alternative that is even less compatible with the human being's anthropological needs, and one that is oppressive and dangerous.

Viewed from today's vantage point, thinking these three perspectives together is especially important. The virtual communities formed on digital platforms, identity-focused forms of politics, and new-right and new-left populist movements simultaneously harbour the emotional and moral need for attachment that Tönnies identifies, the search for meaning and value that Weber describes, and the danger of radical surrender to a root or a cause of the kind against which Plessner warns. Reading these three authors together allows us to see more clearly under what institutional and cultural frameworks the desire for belonging and security produces positive relations of solidarity, and under what conditions it instead turns into exclusionary, totalising, and violence-prone structures.

7. Conclusion: The Limits and Possibilities of Community

When the texts of Tönnies, Weber, and Plessner are read together, we gain the possibility of thinking about the concept of community on three levels. At the first level, Tönnies, through the community/society distinction, renders visible the emotional, moral, and social costs of modernisation; the loss of community is depicted not only as an economic and institutional loss but also as a loss of meaning and belonging. At the second level, Weber, by using the ideal types of communalization and sociation, makes it possible to analyse the complex network of relations in which meaning-production and processes of rationalisation are intertwined in the modern world. At the third level, Plessner shows that, at the point where community ethos becomes politicised, it can turn into a dangerous radicalism that rejects the human being's need for mask, distance, and representation, thereby developing a powerful normative critique of communitarianism.

When these three levels are considered together, community can be seen as neither merely a lost paradise nor merely an oppressive nightmare. Community is a dimension of the human being's eccentric, multi-layered existence, a structure that simultaneously requires different forms of attachment, distance, and institutionalisation. Structures such as the family, friendship, local communities, faith groups, and professional communities are indispensable contexts in which people find meaning, support, and solidarity. Yet where these contexts turn into political projects and totalising ideals, the danger of communitarianism arises. This danger continues to manifest itself today in nationalist, ethnic, religious, or ideological forms of communitarianism.

For this reason, drawing the limits of community is not merely a historical task, as Plessner undertook it within the Weimar context, but also a contemporary imperative. In drawing these limits, it is necessary to draw jointly on Tönnies's sensitivity to the emotional and moral richness of community, the analytical power of Weber's ideal-typical concepts, and the normative warnings of Plessner's anthropological critique. In this way, it becomes possible to develop a perspective that both preserves the positive possibilities of community—solidarity, meaning, mutual recognition—and constitutes a robust line of defence against the exclusionary, violence-prone, and totalising tendencies of communitarianism.

The framework offered by this article can be seen as a step taken in this direction. Further studies could re-examine the conceptual apparatus of Tönnies, Weber, and Plessner against contemporary examples in particular—digital communities, migrant communities, religious

movements, new social movements. In this way, these classical texts can continue to be used not merely as objects of historical interest, but as living and productive resources for understanding the complex social realities of the present.

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