Cosmopolitan sociology and the classical canon: Ferdinand Tönnies and the emergence of global Gesellschaft

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Abstract

How relevant are figures from the classical sociological canon for present day efforts to found cosmopolitan forms of sociological thought? According to the critique of Ulrich Beck, the classical sociologists remain far too wedded to nation-state-centred ways of thinking to play an important role in the development of cosmopolitan sociology. This paper argues that such a critique fails to account for the ways in which certain classical sociologists were attuned to the emerging cosmopolitical conditions of their own time, were not wholly wedded to nation-state-based conceptualizations, and thus can function as both groundings of, and inspirations for, cosmopolitan sociological endeavours. The apparently unpromising case of Tönnies is focused on, the paper showing how he outlined an account of how and why a planet-spanning condition of Gesellschaft developed a position which diverges from and counterpoints Marx’s analysis of similar phenomena in important ways. The stereotype of Tönnies as an arch-conservative is also dissolved, allowing him to be considered as one of the most important antecedents of contemporary cosmopolitan sociological practice and a canonical figure still relevant for present-day purposes.

Keywords: Cosmopolitan sociology; classical sociology; cosmopolitanism; globalization; Ulrich Beck; Tönnies

Introduction

How relevant are figures from the classical sociological canon in the present day? Can they still plausibly be presented as the foundations of a discipline that today seeks to look at the world through cosmopolitan lenses?

These questions have come to figure as crucial ones in contemporary sociology. A discipline which throughout most of the last century taught undergraduate students that the ideas of thinkers of the nineteenth and early...
twentieth centuries were at the root of contemporary sociological conceptualization, must nowadays face the possibility that these ideas may be so fundamentally rooted in the social conditions of their time, that they may no longer be fully fit for purpose in an age such as our own, an epoch apparently characterized by historically unparalleled levels of globalization and conditions of planet-wide connectivity. One of the most trenchant proponents of the view that the classical sociological legacy is now by and large defunct is Ulrich Beck. Beck charges that classical sociological conceptualisations are now obsolete because the latter were very much centred around the key organizational feature of high modernity, namely the boundedness of social, cultural, economic and political relations within the territory of the post-Westphalian nation-state. For Beck (2000:24)

The association between sociology and nation-state was so extensive that the image of ‘modern’, organized individual societies – which became definitive with the national model of political organization – itself became an absolutely necessary concept in and through the founding work of classical social scientists. Beyond all their differences, such theorists as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and even Karl Marx shared a territorial definition of modern society, and thus a model of society centred on the national-state, which has today been shaken by globality and globalization.

This view suggests that a systematic rejection of sociology’s classical inheritance would be the way forward for recalibrating the discipline, rendering it adequate for the complexities of twenty-first century planet-spanning complexity. If understanding of the latter condition requires a thoroughly conceptually renovated ‘cosmopolitan sociology’ (Beck and Sznaider 2006; BJS 2006), then classical sociological conceptualizations, allegedly far too rooted in nation-state-centred ways of thinking, would have to be deposited into the dustbin of intellectual history.

Beck’s provocative claims have stimulated attempts by other scholars to recuperate certain classical thinkers from this kind of critique, viewing them as in fact precursors of, and potentially important guiding spirits for, particular modes of cosmopolitan sociology. For analysts like Turner (1990, 2006) and Chernilo (2006, 2007), the ideas of certain classical sociologists reflect and refract not only the territorial structures of nation-states, but also the emerging trans-national contexts of the mid-nineteenth century and after. While Marx sometimes emphasizes the power of particular bourgeois states over the workers’ movement, it is possible to show that the analysis of that movement and the capitalism that is its antagonist, very much lays emphasis on the planetary spread of both, especially the latter (Renton 2001). Chernilo (2006, 2007) acquits Max Weber of the charge of ‘methodological nationalism’, in so far as the latter never used the term ‘society’, let alone defined it as being synonymous with social relations that pertained within a given state’s borders.
Both Chernilo (2006, 2007) and Inglis and Robertson (2008) argue that far from being conceptually trapped within the confines of national borders, Durkheim sketched out the lineaments of an incipient world-level ‘moral culture’ and offered an account of the nature of what today would be called cultural globalization. These endeavours were aimed at understanding the increasingly world-spanning nature of an organically solidary division of labour and the new cultural forms which corresponded to it, phenomena which he saw as the central emergent social facts of his age. Thus while Beck would exempt classical sociologists from the conceptual realm of cosmopolitan sociology, other scholars would include them, precisely because they seem much more attuned to the emergence of ‘cosmopolitan’ phenomena in their own times than Beck would admit. Beck’s sharp division between classical sociology and nation-states on the one hand, and cosmopolitan sociology and cosmopolitical social conditions on the other, seems to be unjustified, as some classical thinkers can be read as being much more sensitive to world-spanning complexification processes than his account had allowed for. If this is the case, then an enrichment of contemporary endeavours to fashion cosmopolitan (i.e. non-parochial and not naïvely state-centred) sociological lenses can involve identifying ideas from classical sociology that have hitherto gone unremarked. This would not only allow a ‘grounding’ of cosmopolitan sociology in the history of the discipline – a grounding Beck’s overly stark account cannot allow – but might also give us fresh notions of how to think about cosmopolitical social conditions and future constellations of complex globality.

One might think that the work of Ferdinand Tönnies seems an unpromising resource in this regard. This is a thinker who is nowadays known more for his apparent naïve romanticism and arch-conservatism in the face of social change, than for any compelling insights into that change (Adair-Toteff 1995). Tönnies is remembered as the author whose theoretical system was systematically ‘turned on its head’ by Durkheim, when the latter argued that it was in fact pre-modern society that was ‘mechanical’ in nature and modern society that was ‘organic’, rather than vice versa. In most Anglophone theory textbooks in the present day, the story of this encounter tends to be presented as if Durkheim had thoroughly triumphed, rendering Tönnies into a mere footnote in the history of sociological theory. While Tönnies’ coining of the term Gemeinschaft is generally presented as marking the beginning of most subsequent modern studies of ‘community’, none the less his account of the Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft distinction has often been used more as a convenient strawman to attack, rather than presented as a valid distinction in its own right (Crow and Allan 1994). So Tönnies may seem an unlikely candidate for turning to for ideas as to how cosmopolitan sociology could be founded upon the basis of the classical canon, rather than involving a rejection of it.\(^1\)
It is the contention of this paper that cosmopolitan sociological practice today can be founded upon, and draw inspiration from, a refashioned classical canon, and that that canon should feature Tönnies as a prominent figure within it. The dusty old stereotypes of the man and his work should be replaced by an appreciation of two key facts. First, that he endeavoured to take the ‘world as a whole’, which I understand to be a hallmark of cosmopolitan or global sociology, as a central unit of analysis, rather than the nation-state as Beck might allege. Second, that within and through that general framework, he proposes an account of emergent, planet-spanning forces which offers a significant alternative to Marx’s analysis of globally triumphant capitalism. The latter is both at the root of present-day ‘radical’ critiques of economically-led globalization, and also figures as an obvious classical grounding of contemporary cosmopolitan sociological practice. Focusing on Tönnies’ account of planet-spanning Gesellschaft furnishes us with an alternative, classically-inspired analysis of the genesis of cosmopolitical conditions which, while beginning from economic processes, regards the latter in ways which diverge notably from Marxian political economy. Overall, I will argue that Tönnies’ analysis of a planet-encompassing Gesellschaft should figure as a major source of grounding today’s cosmopolitan sociology in classical sociology.

**Contextualizing gemeinschaft and gesellschaft**

Tönnies is a figure who today is more ritualistically cited than actually read. Generations of sociology undergraduates have been taught that Tönnies is the inventor of the intellectually problematic Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft distinction, and little more. Textbook depictions of his work rarely bother to contextualize his most famous book within the broader contours of his life and times. Yet the book Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft (1957 [1887]), was published in 1887, when its author was only 32, and he was still writing sociology some forty-five years later (Heberle 1937). This work was indebted both to Hobbes, and to the accounts of modernity of Adam Smith, de Tocqueville and Carlyle, among other sources (Nisbet 1976: 72–3). These writers furnished Tönnies with a vocabulary to describe what he saw as the key contemporary social issue, namely the shift from more community-oriented to more individualistic forms of thought and action.

Despite the subsequent fame of Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft, it was generally reviewed unfavourably at the time of publication, and was little read or cited, in part because its explicit admission of its indebtedness to Marx tainted its author in the eyes both of the bourgeois intelligentsia and the Bismarckian authorities, who were enacting anti-socialist laws at this period (Mitzman 1971, 1973). Tönnies thus can hardly be painted as a reactionary conservative, even
if some passages in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* betray a certain nostalgia as to the allegedly *Gemeinschaft*-like conditions of his rural youth, feelings typical among many German intellectuals of the time (Ringer 1969). But as Nisbet (1976: 74) notes, a careful reading of Tönnies’ overall *oeuvre* reveals that there is really no stronger a sense of nostalgia in it than in the works of other classical thinkers such as Weber or Durkheim.

Despite initial, politically-induced setbacks in his career, Tönnies had by the start of World War I become recognized as one of Germany’s leading social scientists, along with figures such as Weber and Sombart (Heberle 1937). The Tönnies of the immediate pre-war and postwar periods was very well-connected in pan-European and trans-Atlantic scholarly networks, with a recent biographer plausibly painting him as very much a leading scholarly cosmopolitan of his day (Carstens 2005). We are thus far away from the subsequent stereotyped image of Tönnies as a *Volkish* man of the right, a view still being recycled in the present day (see e.g. Podoksik 2008). And the cosmopolitanism of his professional life arguably makes itself felt in all his writings (Mitzman 1971: 519; Harris 2001: xi–xiii), even – I would argue – in the early and ostensibly ‘conservative’ *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. His Social Democrat-leaning political activities as a public intellectual were of a cosmopolitan hue too (Holton 2002). These points will be worth bearing in mind when we come to face below the possibility that there are anti-Semitic overtones in his account of the global expansion of capitalism.

It has been frequently pointed out (e.g. Cahnman 1968: 137–9; Mitzman 1971: 507; Nisbet 1976: 76) that the *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* distinction is deployed by Tönnies in at least two ways in his writings. In the first place, he deployed it as the means of describing certain historical shifts in Europe in two distinct periods, namely the transition from early Roman history to the period of the Roman empire, and the transition from feudalism to ‘modernity’ in northern Europe from circa the sixteenth century. For Tönnies, these periods of transition were very similar to each other, because they involved shifts from *Gemeinschaft*-like to *Gesellschaft*-style social conditions, from a situation whereby tightly-bound, affectively-based groups were the main sorts of social actors, to one where rationally-calculating, selfish individuals occupied centre stage in the social order (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 234).

In the second place, Tönnies also understood the *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* distinction to involve ideal-typical models that could be applied to any social circumstances, not just those mentioned above. A corollary of this procedure is that one can examine any given social order and one might find within it elements of both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* properties. Thus on this understanding of the distinction, it does not describe two antithetical types of social order, but rather describes two different sorts of ideal-typical social characteristics that can be found in various admixtures within empirically-existing contexts.
At various points in his writings, Tönnies uses either the ‘ideal-typical’ or the ‘historical’ meaning of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. The main thrust of the 1887 book involves the historical understanding of the distinction, while in his later output the ideal-typical usage tends more to be deployed (Mitzman 1973: 131). But both forms of the distinction are present in the 1887 book, as for example when he depicts (e.g. Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 227) the remaining vestiges of Gemeinschaft-style attitudes and practices (e.g. continuing strong familial bonds among the working classes) existing within a present-day historical context that is primarily characterized by Gesellschaft modes of thinking.

The stereotypical depiction of Tönnies that very often pertains in textbooks involves presenting the historical version of the Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft distinction as if it were the only possible version of the distinction, leaving the ideal-typical usage unmentioned or under-emphasized. This has the effect of making Tönnies seem to be a much more analytically crude figure than he actually is, seemingly forwarding a simplistic, romanticized narrative about transformation from idealized ‘community’ to negatively construed ‘social atomism’. Such presentations often omit to mention the crucial fact that Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft are themselves derived from two more fundamental concepts. Tönnies’ general epistemology is better described as ‘socio-psychological’ rather than as primarily ‘social-structural’, because he sees the fundamental building-blocks of human reality being two different forms of ‘will’: the ways in which an individual conceptualises the world around them – especially other people – and acts within and upon it. Tönnies’ most basic distinction is between Wesenwille (natural will) and Kürwille (rational will). While the former involves a judgment as to the intrinsic value of an act rather than its practicality, the latter involves a conscious choice of specific means for the pursuit of a specific end (Mitzman 1973: 80).

These socio-psychological terms – which Max Weber (1949) would later make much use of – are the bases upon which the social-structural notions of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft are erected. While Wesenwille – characterized by strong affectivity and group-oriented feelings – describes the typical psychological and social-relational dispositions that constitute a Gemeinschaft social order, Kürwille describes the equivalent dispositions – involving high levels of individualistic calculation – that constitute the social order of Gesellschaft. Thus it is erroneous to characterize Tönnies as primarily a ‘structuralist’ author, in the same manner as we might judge Durkheim. Instead, Tönnies is much closer to his compatriot Weber, in that the starting point for analysis is the subjective viewpoint of the actor, examining how s/he thinks about, and thus relates to, other people. Thus Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft are not so much ‘objectively existing’ social-structural conditions in the sort of sense pursued by the earlier Durkheim, but are constellations of individuals who view each other in particular characteristic ways, either as ends-in-themselves (Gemeinschaft) or as means-to-ends (Gesellschaft). In the
historical sense, then, the transition from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft fundamentally means a shift from the predominance of one kind of ‘will’ to another, from Wesenwille to Kürwille. In the ideal-typical sense, the aim is to examine any given empirical social condition for evidence as to the preponderance of the one kind of will or the other in how persons typically think about and relate to each other. Thus the development of European modernity is best described as the increasing dominance of Kürwille over Wesenwille, and that it is changes in forms of consciousness which lead to changes in social structure, rather than the other way around (as is arguably the case with both Marx and the early Durkheim).

The global spread of gesellschaft

The point above is particularly significant here, for when Tönnies argues that Gesellschaft is in his own day increasingly planet-wide in scope, he is claiming that there has been, and in future will be, a global spread of Kürwille, a changing of forms of consciousness which in turn creates ever more globe-spanning conditions of Gesellschaft. It is not that the world-wide spread of Gesellschaft changes fundamentally how people think; rather, it is the global expansion of Kürwille-based ways of thinking which leads to the spread of Gesellschaft-style social relations over ever greater swathes of the earth.

Given Beck’s critique of classical sociology as being wholly rooted in nation-state-centred conceptions of social order, it is crucial to note that neither Gemeinschaft nor Gesellschaft is conceived of as being contained within state borders. This is so in both the ‘historical’ and ‘ideal typical’ versions of the distinction mentioned above. In the latter sense, one certainly could examine the mixture of Gemeinschaft- and Gesellschaft-like dispositions and practices that existed within a given ‘national’ territory. But one could apply this mode of analysis to any configuration of social relations, including trans-national ones. Likewise, in the ‘historical’ sense of the distinction, there is no logical reason why Gemeinschaft or Gesellschaft have to be seen as referring to state-bounded or ‘national’ entities. While a particular, historically-existent Gemeinschaft is by definition a ‘bounded’ entity – the boundaries being governed by strong cultural senses of insider/outsider, native/foreigner, and so on – that entity need not be coterminous with the borders of modern nation-states, but could be a clan, tribe or some other non-state entity. Even more pertinently, as we will now see, a historically-existing Gesellschaft is understood by Tönnies to be corrosive of all boundaries, be these of a state- or non-state variety.

This is because the innate tendency of Kürwille forms of consciousness is to pull ever greater numbers of people into their orbit, such ways of thinking having a decontextualized character which allows them to spread anywhere
and everywhere, regardless of whatever boundaries, geographical or cultural, may lie in their path. The group that above all promotes these ways of thinking are the class of merchants, the group that for Tönnies are the real revolutionaries of human history. Indeed, *Gesellschaft* itself is defined by Tönnies as ‘a condition in which, according to the expression of Adam Smith, “Every man . . . becomes in some measure a merchant” ’ (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 76).

The merchant class’s embodying of the spirit of *Kürwille*, as well as their capacity to transmit over large distances its characteristic modes of thought and interaction, give them a powerful capacity to transform social relations. For Tönnies, the merchant is the purest embodiment of *Kürwille*, as the will to enrich himself makes the merchant unscrupulous and the type of egotistic, self-willed individual to whom all human beings except his nearest friends are only means and tools to his ends or purposes; he is the embodiment of *Gesellschaft*. (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 165)

The merchant so strongly embodies the spirit of *Kürwille* that he figures as . . . the first thinking and free human being to appear in the normal development of social life. He is, as much as possible, isolated from all necessary relationships, duties, and prejudices. (‘A merchant, it has been said very properly, is not necessarily the citizen of any particular country’ – Adam Smith.) He is free from the ties of the life of the *Gemeinschaft*; the freer he is from them, the better for him. (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 81)

Moreover, a merchant . . . is without home, a traveller, a connoisseur of foreign customs and arts without love or piety for those of any one country, a linguist speaking several languages. Flippant and double-tongued, adroit, adaptable . . . He moves about quickly and smoothly, changes his character and intellectual attitude (beliefs or opinions) as if they were fashions of dress, one to be worn here, another there. (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 168)

The merchant’s exceptional freedom from the thought patterns of *Wesenwille*, and thus the social relations of *Gemeinschaft*, means that he is unencumbered by any of the moral considerations of *Gemeinschaft*, such as ties of patriotism or familial piety. In this sense, the merchant is the quintessential ‘cosmopolitan’, radically free of any social ties that would hinder the pursuit of profit. Indeed Tönnies claims that the ‘merchant class is by nature, and mostly also by origin, international as well as national and urban, i.e., it belongs to *Gesellschaft*, not *Gemeinschaft*’ (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 225). Merchants are either ‘foreigners’ who intrude into particular *Gemeinschaft* contexts, in the process changing them utterly, or they are deviant members of a *Gemeinschaft* who treat their supposedly ‘own’ people in *Kürwille*- rather than *Wesenwille*-based terms, transforming *Gemeinschaft* more and more into *Gesellschaft*. 

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The dyadic opposite of the geographically and mentally mobile merchant is the sedentary, custom-observing peasant (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 168). Thus Tönnies notes that the head of a household, a peasant or burgher, turns his attention inwardly towards the centre of the locality, the *Gemeinschaft*, to which he belongs; whereas the trading class lends its attention to the outside world; it is concerned only with the roads which connect towns and with the means of transit. (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 79)

This emphasis on the trans-border movement of both merchants and their commodities resonates in present-day research on ‘mobilities’ (Urry 1999). It is the merchant class’s mobility, both physical and intellectual, that is at the root of their ability to disseminate wherever they go the dispositions of *Kürwille* and thus *Gesellschaft*-style social relations.

Once the *Kürwille*-based attitudes of merchants take hold in a given locality, that locality is inexorably turned into part of the overall network of *Gesellschaft*. The essence of *Kürwille* forms of consciousness and *Gesellschaft* modes of action and interaction, is capitalist forms of trade and production. In his explanation of this point, Tönnies explicitly depicts the ‘globalizing’ tendencies of capitalistic *Kürwille*. The more merchants spread *Kürwille*-centred thinking and practice in different locales, the more . . . the ‘capitalistic society’ [inverted commas in original] increases in power and gradually attains the ascendancy [over *Wesenwille* and *Gemeinschaft*]. Tending as it does to be *cosmopolitan and unlimited in size*, it is the most distinct form of the many phenomena represented by the sociological concept of the *Gesellschaft*. (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 258–9; emphasis added)

**Beyond Marx**

When reconstructing Tönnies’ analysis of the global spread of *Gesellschaft*, one must understand both what Tönnies means by ‘capitalism’, and also how he relates it to *Kürwille*. Here we have to give some attention to the points pursued in his short tome of 1921 on Marx (Tönnies 1974 [1921]). In this text, Tönnies notes the great extent to which the argument outlined in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* in 1887 was inspired by Marx. However, we need to add that even as early as 1887, the young Tönnies had already broken significantly with some of Marx’s key claims about capitalism. In the 1921 book, Tönnies outlines the essence of his disagreement with Marx as to the nature and historical genesis of capitalism, a disagreement that is implicit in the 1887 work, but which still very much underpins its argument as to the global spread of *Gesellschaft*. 
The 1921 account is based upon the *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* distinction, this time used to show that the production of goods (labour) is an activity ideal-typically characteristic of *Wesenwille* and *Gemeinschaft*, whereas trade is fundamentally associated with *Kürwille* and *Gesellschaft*. This is because

labour wants to produce concrete value: it wants things which sustain, advance and adorn the life of the working person; [while] trade wants to gain abstract value... and pursues the objective of its own perpetual accumulation. (Tönnies 1974 [1921]: 151)

Tönnies takes issue with Marx’s claim that trade and merchants’ capital are subsidiary aspects of the capitalist mode of production, both ideal-typically and historically. For Tönnies, Marx argued that at the point in time when capital-in-general ‘became master of the production process’, it was then that merchants’ capital

... is demoted from its former independent existence to a special momentum of the capitalistic establishment as such... [becoming] a form of capital with [only] some specific functions. (Tönnies 1974 [1921]: 149)

Marx is wrong in this regard because the capital that comes to control production is in fact merchants’ capital itself, not some mythical ‘capital-in-general’. Thus ‘Marx must admit that capital profit does not alone and foremost originate in the sphere of production, but also, and earlier, in the sphere of circulation’ (Tönnies 1974 [1921]: 150–1), i.e. in trade and the (always potentially trans-national) practices of merchants.

Far from capitalism superseding and subordinating merchants’ capital, it is in fact the latter (i.e. trade) that is ‘the essence of capitalism... [C]apitalism is a more developed, more powerful, and more expanded form of trade’ (Tönnies 1974 [1921]: 151). Tönnies believes Marx is correct to note that the development of capitalism involves a situation where ‘the production process becomes permanently linked with the circulation process’ (Tönnies 1974 [1921]: 152), but – contra Marx – it is not that the former comes to subordinate the latter, but rather that the latter comes to control the former. Thus the development of capitalism involves the increasing control of labour and production (characterized by *Wesenwille* and *Gemeinschaft*) by trade and merchants’ capital (characterized by *Kürwille* and *Gesellschaft*). Thus the *Kürwille* of the merchant comes to control the *Wesenwille* of the peasant and the urban artisan – eventually turning both of these persons into factory workers – and so in the sphere of production *Gemeinschaft* is over time replaced by *Gesellschaft*. *Kürwille*-based consciousness transforms labour relations, due to the merchant class subordinating production to their own ends of exchange and profit-seeking.

This re-orientation in the 1921 book of Marx’s account of capitalism is consistent with the general idea already pursued in the 1887 work, namely that over time in northern Europe, the activities of the merchant class are the
primary mechanism whereby Wesenwille and Gemeinschaft are overturned by Kürwille and Gesellschaft. This transformation initially begins in the sphere of production, when merchants’ capital comes to control labour, and when the workforce start to produce goods primarily for non-local markets rather than for their own geographically-limited Gemeinschaft. Increasingly, the merchants’ power reaches out from the urban areas where it was originally concentrated, pulling ever more locales into its sphere of influence:

This class seems to reside in the centre of every . . . locality, which it tends to penetrate and revolutionize. The whole country is nothing but a market in which to purchase and sell . . . the more extensive the area, the more completely it becomes an area of the Gesellschaft, for the more widespread and freer trade becomes. Also, the more extensive the trade area, the more probable it is that the pure laws of exchange trade prevail, and that those other non-commercial qualities which relate men and things may be ignored. Trade tends, finally, to concentrate on one main market, the world market, upon which all other markets become dependent. (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 79; emphasis added)

The outcome both of merchants’ geographically mobile activities, and also of this group coming over time to control production processes, is the spread of Kürwille forms of thinking, and the Gesellschaft-style social relations that go with them, first throughout all national territories, and then eventually throughout the whole world. For Tönnies, such a process is inexorable, with Gemeinschaft inevitably falling under the rule of Gesellschaft, the latter eventually involving a planet-spanning set of attitudes based upon calculating self-interest. Thus

to the extent that the common people, with its labour, is subjected to trade or capitalism, it discontinues being a people (Volk). It adapts itself to foreign forces and conditions and becomes educated or civilized. (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 169)

where the latter two terms refer to forms of thought and conduct thoroughly impregnated with the transportable and generalizable (and thus always potentially planet-wide) dispositions of Kürwille.

It is this situation Tönnies has in mind when he defines Gesellschaft as ‘modern, cultured, cosmopolitan’ (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 134), because ‘cosmopolitanism’ is the essential feature of the merchant class. Again quoting Adam Smith, Tonnies argues that over time, exposure to ‘exchange and barter tend to make every human being into a merchant’ (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 81), that is, someone who thinks in the manner of Kürwille. In areas where merchants have imported Kürwille-style attitudes, eventually all social groups, especially the upper classes, and ‘at least in tendency, the whole people, acquire the characteristics of the Gesellschaft’ (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 225).
In the 1887 book Tönnies is explicit that Kürwille and Gesellschaft are potentially transportable to all regions of the earth. Just as Gemeinschaft is by definition about locality, Gesellschaft, its ideal-typical opposite, is by definition non-local (indeed anti-local) and thus always potentially global in scope. To shift into Weber’s terms, whereas Wesenwille involves modes of substantive rationality rooted within strongly localized forms of group solidarity, Kürwille involves modes of formal rationality that could be adopted anywhere and everywhere, precisely because they are not freighted with the weight of cultural particularities and specific forms of group affiliation. The generalizability, transportability and mobility of Kürwille is what makes these ways of thinking always potentially global in reach (see Ritzer 2007).

Culturally non-specific Kürwille and Gesellschaft are first transported around the world by merchants and their activities, this process becoming much more systematic once capitalism has been instantiated as the subordination of production to merchants’ capital. Tönnies summarizes thus:

Trade, the production of goods – the workshop and the factory – are the elements by which [Gesellschaft] extends its network over the whole populated earth. It desires movement and quick movement; it must dissolve custom in order to develop a taste for the new and for imported goods. It figures on individual motives, especially on young people’s curiosity and love of finery . . . Affection and fidelity to tradition, to one’s own, to one’s heritage, must necessarily give way. Commerce has ever a disintegrating effect . . . Even the country folk soon find their old customs peculiar and absurd . . . The pattern of the metropolis is imitated [even in the most remote rural areas]. (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 134; emphasis added)

The conclusion drawn by Tönnies in 1887 is that the global spread of Gesellschaft is unstoppable. It is not just northern Europe but the whole planet that will eventually witness these processes. As he puts it, a ‘great transformation takes place . . . the capitalistic society through a long process spreads itself . . . over the whole of mankind’ (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 258–9; emphasis added). The future seems to be characterized by a global condition where Kürwille and Gesellschaft spread to ever further reaches of the world by means of the institutions of capitalism – the modern routinized expression of the dispositions of the merchant class – and where members of particular Gemeinschaften particularly open to the appeal of self-interested actions willingly adopt the new sets of attitudes:

Gesellschaft . . . emerged [when] persons . . . join hands eagerly to exchange across all distances, limits, and scruples, and establish this speculative Utopia as the only country, the only city, in which all fortune seekers and all merchant adventurers have a really common interest. [Just] as the fiction of money is represented by metal or paper, it [Gesellschaft] is represented by the entire globe (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 76–7).
Thus the system of *Gesellschaft* eventually comes to be prevalent across the whole planet, and the pre-eminent symbol of *Gesellschaft* becomes the globe itself, a situation that pays testament to the planet-encompassing power of culturally-weightless *Kürwille*.

**Gesellschaft and metropolis**

Another key phenomenon in Tönnies’ account of the planetary expansion of *Gesellschaft* is the metropolis. This is because *Kürwille* particularly thrives in large cities, by dint of their impersonality and anonymousness, and the large urban area is the locale where *Kürwille*-style attitudes are both born and take root. Thus *Gesellschaft* and metropolis are very much related to each other; indeed Tönnies’ sense is that metropolis is *Gesellschaft*, embodying the latter in its most essential form (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 227). Thus he argues that ‘the more general the condition of *Gesellschaft* becomes in the nation or a group of nations, the more this entire “country” or the entire “world” begins to resemble one large city’ (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 227). Once *Gesellschaft* becomes endemic across ever greater portions of the planet, the whole globe seems to resemble one giant metropolis. As far as particular metropolises, such as Berlin, are concerned, the vast urban conglomeration

... contains representatives from a whole group of nations, i.e. of the world. In the metropolis, money and capital are unlimited and almighty. It is able to produce and supply goods and science for the entire earth as well as laws and public opinion for all nations. It represents the world market and world traffic; in it world industries are concentrated. Its newspapers are world papers, its people come from all corners of the earth, being curious and hungry for money and pleasure. (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 266–7; emphasis added)

Thus life in metropolitan *Gesellschaft* involves phenomena which both emanate from the metropolis – potentially affecting activities in every corner of the globe – and which also pour into it constantly from all points of the compass, a theme nowadays evoked in the literature on ‘world cities’ as hubs in global economic, political and social networks (Sassen 2006). Tönnies’ account of the social structure of metropolitan *Gesellschaft* can be reconstructed from both the 1887 work and the short 1909 study entitled *Custom* (1961 [1909]), which is generally overlooked in exegeses of his writings. In both texts, a further dyad is present, namely the opposition between ‘custom’ and ‘tradition’ on one side – features of *Gemeinschaft* – and ‘fashion’ on the other, which is taken to be a central feature of *Gesellschaft*. Tönnies in the 1909 book writes that while ‘it is the nature of custom to be archaic, fixed, heavy and serious’ (Tönnies 1961 [1909]: 123), *Gesellschaft* is ‘pervaded with haste, unrest,
continual novelty, fluidity and a persistence only in incessant change’ (Tönnies 1961 [1909]: 135). This is because the metropolis is

the centre of science and culture, which always go hand in hand with commerce and industry. Here the arts must make a living; they are exploited in a capitalistic way. Thoughts spread and change with astonishing rapidity. Speeches and books through mass distribution become stimuli of far-reaching importance. (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 227–8)

Thus the capitalistic commodification of thoughts and opinions is at the root of metropolitan life’s faddishness and orientation towards the always-new. Novel ideas, opinions and styles are created, and are first of all taken up, by metropolitan elites. In metropolitan conditions, ‘the views of the upper and ruling classes . . . are formed outside of custom . . . These views partially originate in deviant new usages and habits, and the latter are frequently based on an imitation of strangers’ (Tönnies 1961 [1909]: 114). It is urban elites who introduce new styles and opinions, through their exposure to ‘strangers’, that is, through their contacts with other urban elites in other metropolises worldwide. In the Custom study, Tönnies depicts the cultural division of labour which underpins this situation:

The ruling classes of a society always play a dual role which is often divided among different strata of the class. On the one hand, they start innovations, insofar as they often import ‘new fashions’ from foreign countries. On the other hand, they are staunchly conservative and strongly ‘nationalistic’. Thus they adhere to the old customs precisely because their own position is based on age . . . it is not seldom that a younger nobility (‘paper barons’) represents the one role and the older nobility the other role, or at least accentuates it more. (Tönnies 1961 [1909]: 130–1)

Different elite strata play different roles: the ‘younger’ elite groups (e.g. parvenu groups, ‘new money’) import new ideas from ‘abroad’, thus exhibiting globally-oriented, cosmopolitan Gesellschaft-style tendencies (see also Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 168); while ‘older’ elite groups (‘old money’, the traditionalistic aristocracy and established upper bourgeoisie) do not just retain, but also in fact create, more apparently Gemeinschaft-style forms of culture. That the latter group do not just (attempt to) reproduce ‘traditional’ cultural forms, but also in fact (have to) invent and perform the allegedly traditional, is indicated by Tönnies’ comment that a de-traditionalized metropolitan Gesellschaft ‘is inclined to idealize its opposite; the antique becomes the [contemporary] style. One longs to return to nature; old castoffs are resurrected; old forms of life and old customs are valued and preserved’ (Tönnies 1961 [1909]: 135). Through a series of what are nowadays called ‘inventions of tradition’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992), produced under and compelled by the conditions of metropolitan Gesellschaft, particular elite groups try to construct

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forms of culture that are allegedly expressive of older forms of *Gemeinschaft* (e.g. Castells 2004), as means whereby ontological security can be maintained against the threat of epistemic chaos that is the quintessential feature of planet-spanning *Gesellschaft* and its constant re-structuring of metropolitan life. Moreover, the lower middle and working classes eventually take up the cultural forms, both (supposedly) native and more cosmopolitan, imported or invented by their social superiors (Tönnies 1961 [1909]: 117). Once the bourgeois elites of metropolises create, and are compelled to have, culturally complex dispositions – expressing both *faux Gemeinschaft* and cosmopolitan *Gesellschaft* – over time even the lowest classes enter into such conditions too.

**Tönnies and cosmopolitan sociology today**

I have thus far set out the main lineaments of Tönnies’ account of the planetary spread of *Gesellschaft*, and its embodiment in and through metropolitan conditions. A major reason for regarding Tönnies as an important figure for a refashioned canon of classical sociologists upon which cosmopolitan sociology can be founded and can draw inspiration, is that his analysis of what we today call ‘global capitalism’ provides an alternate account to the more influential one offered by Marx.

First, ‘Tönnies’ emphasis on the revolutionizing power of merchants ‘grants a higher, more decisive status in capitalism to the entrepreneur, the trader, [and] the huckster than does Marx’ (Bergner 1975: 354), and thus provides a different interpretation of who the key group in modern economic globalization were: industrial capitalists for Marx, the merchant class for Tönnies. This suggests a different reading of how and why capitalism became globally hegemonic than is usually proffered in accounts of economic globalization which draw upon Marxism.

Second, capitalism’s creation of ‘cosmopolitan’ ideas and spaces, both physical and mental – a position explicitly adumbrated in *The Communist Manifesto* – is also a concern of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, but in the latter is seen in another light, as the outcome not of wholly ‘material’ developments like primitive accumulation or industrialization, but of the spreading of *Kürwille* attitudes by merchants constantly on the move. Thus Tönnies is suggesting that the roots of economic globalization are attitudinal rather than technologically-driven, and that it is a change in mentalities which leads to changes in social structure, rather than vice versa, the latter arguably being the thrust of Marxian materialism. Tönnies can thus be seen as putting a novel spin on the Marx–Weber debates about the origins of capitalism, by sharing Weber’s concerns about the ‘spiritual’ (albeit here radically secular) roots of capitalism, with Marx’s focus on the globe-spanning expansion of the latter. As reflections upon the nature, rise and planetary scope of capitalism are presumably key
concerns of any kind of cosmopolitan sociology, consideration of Tönnies provides us with a new nexus of ideas to work with in theorizing the dynamics of ‘global capitalism’.

Third, Tönnies’ explicit connecting of globe-spanning Gesellschaft with the metropolis – a connection arguably not fully worked through in Marx – can be viewed both as an important extension of Simmel’s foundational ideas as to metropolitan life, and as a means of connecting the rise of capitalism, the development of urbanization, the role of elite groups, the mutation of mentalities, and the generation of novel cultural modalities, all considered within an explicitly ‘global’ frame of reference. This is a conceptual constellation which could well function as a productive research paradigm in the present day, a potentially highly useful inheritance bequeathed by classical sociology to contemporary cosmopolitan sociological practice.

Of course, some objections can be mounted towards this attempt to present Tönnies as a still compelling figure today. Is not Tönnies’ depiction of cosmopolitan phenomena wholly grounded in the context of his time, when cosmopolitanism was regarded by the German intelligentsia as something suspicious and un-patriotic, something sinister and unsettling, associated with the ‘rootless’ Jews (Ringer 1969)? Do overtones of anti-Semitism hang in the air, preventing a fruitful connection between his work and the avowedly non-parochial, open-to-the-Other cosmopolitan sociology of today?

I believe Tönnies’ work can be exonerated from these charges, which in fact could be put to practically any German thinker of his time. A key point is that Tönnies’ Social Democrat political leanings (Adair-Toteff 1995) very much prevented him from degenerating into the crude anti-Semitism of his contemporary, Werner Sombart, whose account of the merchant class strongly conceived of this group as being primarily Jewish, and viewed their alleged cultural cosmopolitanism (i.e. lack of patriotism) in highly negative terms (Grundmann and Stehr 2001) But whereas Sombart saw Jewish mercantile cosmopolitanism as solely a destructive social force, the account of merchants’ transformative powers in Tönnies’ 1887 book is certainly not anti-Semitic,8 and also contains a sense – in part influenced by Marx – of the impressive creative capacities of that group in fashioning a wholly new sort of world-order. It is part of the posthumous misrepresentation of Tönnies to view Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft as simply a conservative text. It is hardly that, let alone one defaced by anti-Semitic sentiments. To be sure, the evaluation of the merchant class’s world-changing powers is ambivalent, but it is not wholly negative, because the world they create is seen to have beneficial as well as negative aspects. Indeed, the very planet-spanning nature of Gesellschaft brings with it various phenomena Tönnies was in whole-hearted sympathy with, such as the scope of trades unions extending ‘to become of metropolitan, national, and finally of international constituency’ (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 169). The increasingly cosmopolitan nature of the labour movement, and the forms of
neo-*Gemeinschaft* that it creates, are as much a feature of planetary *Gesellschaft* as is atomistic social order.

What we could call trade union cosmopolitanization is seen by Tönnies to have been preceded by similar processes enacted by ‘the organizations of the educated classes of the capitalists’ (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 169), and this points to another beneficial aspect of the *Gesellschaft* produced in the first instance by the travelling merchant class, namely the creation of an increasingly world-level public sphere. We saw that in the 1887 book, the metropolis was seen as generating a press that published ‘world papers’, periodicals which both reported events from all parts of the globe, and published opinions that could reverberate all around the planet. Thus within metropolitan, planet-spanning *Gesellschaft*

... the press is not confined within natural [sic] borders, but, in its tendencies and potentialities, it is definitely international, thus comparable to the power of a permanent or temporary alliance of states ... [I]ts ultimate aim [is] to abolish the multiplicity of states and substitute for it a *single world republic*, coextensive with the world market, which would be ruled by thinkers, scholars and writers and could dispense with means of coercion other than those of a psychological nature. Such tendencies and intentions will perhaps never find a clear expression ... but their recognition ... [shows] that the existence of natural [sic] states is but a *temporary limitation of the boundaryless Gesellschaft*. (Tönnies 1957 [1887]: 221; emphasis added)

This optimistic depiction of the future is a liberal and socialist vision, not a conservative one shot through with anti-Semitic slurs, and it was developed throughout Tönnies’ later career, most notably in a project on public opinion dynamics, begun in 1907 and published in 1922 (Tönnies 1922; English translation 2000 [1922]). Planet-wide *Gesellschaft* brings with it new forms of association which cross national borders, bringing into being a new ‘world republic’ governed by the force of reason.9 Here we see the more positive side of Kürwille – rational will involves not only selfish calculation, but also the capacity to sift evidence and provide reasoned opinions, the very elements of rationality that Habermas (1987) has sought recently to recuperate. And here we also see how Tönnies’ understanding of the socio-politically positive aspects of cosmopolitanism starts to bear resemblances to modern-day conceptualizations, not least because of the shared inheritance of Kantian political philosophy in this regard (Carstens 2005).

**Conclusion**

We might safely assume that all works of classical sociology bear the imprint of their conditions of production. Tönnies’ writings are no different. But any work worthy of the name ‘classic’ contains multiple different elements,
that different generations of exegetes will fasten upon. In an age where we endeavour to create cosmopolitan modes of sociological conceptualization, Tönnies is worth paying attention to. While one dimension of his thoughts on cosmopolitan social classes reaches backwards towards some of the more reactionary ideas of German intellectuals of the time, others point forward to conceptions more suggestive of a productive ‘fusion of horizons’ between his concerns and our own. Moreover, for reasons suggested above, the (ambivalent) focus on the world-creating capacities of the merchant class yield a still compelling alternative account to that of Marx of how and why capitalist economic and social relations came to be planet-encompassing in scope. Like all classical thinkers, this account is open to contestation and critique. But a more general point remains: Tönnies, just as much as Marx (Renton 2001) and Durkheim (Inglis and Robertson 2008), developed rich responses to the emerging cosmopolitical conditions of his age. He cannot be written off as a mere museum piece, as the critique of Beck suggests. Quite conversely, in an age as self-conscious of matters of cosmopolitanism and globality as our own, it is time to rescue his work from the reputational penumbra, and to show that if cosmopolitan sociology is in need of genealogical grounding in classical sociology, his name must feature prominently among the ancestors.

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Notes

1. Chernilo’s (2006, 2007) recent comprehensive reviews of cosmopolitanism in classical sociology do not contain any mention of Tönnies. Although there was some interest in Tönnies’ work in US sociology in the early 1970s (e.g. Cahnmann 1973), over the last twenty years to my knowledge only Lindenfeld (1988), Adair-Toteff (1995), Deflem (1999), Splichal and Hardt (2000) and Harris (2001) have attempted English language recuperations of Tönnies’ reputation, and all of these have been limited in scope, focusing only on specific parts of his work and not teasing out its implications for cosmopolitan sociology. An increased level of interest in Tönnies’ writings in the German-speaking world (Clausen 1998) is indicated by the publication of his collected works from 1998 onwards (Clausen et al. 1998–present), and by some specific studies: Bickel (1991), Clausen and Schlüter (1991), Fechner (1992), Merz-Benz (1995) and Carstens (2005).

2. See e.g. Macionis and Plummer (2005: 15).

3. Two English translations of Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft are available: by Loomis (Tönnies 1957 [1887]) and Hollis (Tönnies 2001 [1887]). As most readers will have relatively easy access to the 1957 translation, and as it is adequate for present purposes, I will refer to it.

4. I am here using ‘ideal type’ in the customary Weberian sense, bearing in mind the historical irony that Weber’s development of ideal types was in fact part inspired by Tönnies (Mitzman 1973).

5. Durkheim himself notes the emphasis on ‘will’ and subjective orientations in Tönnies’ system, a feature which he believes differentiates it markedly from his own approach (Aldous 1972).

6. There is a strong affinity here with Joseph Schumpeter’s account of Unternehmergeist, the ‘restless spirits’ whom he sees as the entrepreneurial driving forces of
economic innovations. Given his familiarity with the works of the classical German sociologists, it is likely that Schumpeter’s account of ‘entrepreneurship’ derives at least in part from Tönnies’ account of merchants (Swedberg 1991).

7. This presentation of the metropolis very likely influenced Simmel’s famous essay on the same subject dating from 1903 (1997 [1903]).

8. There is nothing in Tönnies’ biography to suggest that, even as a young man, he naively fell prey to such political viewpoints – see Carstens 2005; Mitzman 1973.

9. The English translation does not reproduce those sections which deal with the transnational ‘republic of scholars’. In the original, see e.g. Tönnies 1922: 187. For discussion, see Splichal and Hardt (2000). The cosmopolitan element in Tönnies’ politics is also emphasized by the editors of the 24 volume collected works (Clausen et al. 1998–present).

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