

Community and Modernity

The word “community” is ubiquitous in our public discourse. Some examples include: community organizing; the Black community; the LGBTQ+ community; community development; the business community; the Evangelical community; the academic community, etc.

We start with a deep dive into how and why this word is deployed so widely,

- Ferdinand Tönnies’ drew the distinction between *gemeinschaft* (community) versus *gesellschaft* (society), that is social relations based on personal relations, traditions, and deeply shared values versus a mass society organized around formal, impersonal, contractual relations.
- Spreading out from the core concept of *gemeinschaft* (community), it seems that our contemporary widespread usage of “community” suggests a recognition something positive and essential to human relations, perhaps solidarity and connectedness,

Likewise, the word “modernity” needs its own separate set of key words to help us place our ideas of “community” into a context from which to gather our thoughts. One summary might be: By *modernity* we mean the ensemble of historical forces — industrialization, urbanization, the rise of capitalism and the nation-state, secularization, and the dominance of instrumental reason — that have reshaped social life since the eighteenth century. Modernity dissolves inherited bonds of place, kin, and creed and replaces them with mobile, individualized, contractual relations.

For our seminar, please read or view the resources below and then write a response of at least 200 words. There are writing prompts at the end, but feel free to respond as you wish. Email your written response to lewesseminar@gmail.com no later than Monday, April 6. Please read all the posted responses **prior** to the seminar meeting on Wednesday, April 8, at 3 pm

RESOURCES:

1. **Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft** — Wikipedia overview of Tönnies’ foundational concept. A clear, accessible introduction to the community/society distinction that anchors the whole seminar.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gemeinschaft_and_Gesellschaft

2. **Thinking Well About Modernity:**

a) Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modernity>

b) [Claude.ai](#) – See Document in the Schedule Page

3. **“The Vanishing Neighbor”** by Marc Dunkelman. Author presentation on book that accounts for how middle-ring relationships – the neighbors, civic associations, and fellow parishioners that once anchored community life – have quietly disappeared from American life.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yEA7OBjLes>
4. **“America Has a Loneliness Epidemic. Here Are 6 Steps to Address It”** – NPR, May 2023. A concise, freely accessible account of the U.S. Surgeon General’s landmark advisory on the epidemic of loneliness and social disconnection in America. This piece brings the Tönnies–Putnam diagnosis squarely into the present moment and raises the question of what modern society owes its members in the way of connection.
<https://www.npr.org/2023/05/02/1173418268/loneliness-connection-mental-health-dementia-surgeon-general>
5. **“Why Brains Need Friends”** - Made to mingle: Why your brain is happier with friends - Your brain is at its healthiest when you get face-to-face interaction with your friends, says neuroscientist Ben Rein in his new book, “Why Brains Need Friends: The Neuroscience of Social Connection”
<https://www.mprnews.org/episode/2026/01/16/made-to-mingle-why-your-brain-is-happier-with-friends>
6. Our friend Ron Collins contributes this Commentary from the March 24, 2026 *Cape Gazette*: [Bringing together community, culture and commerce | Cape Gazette](#)

Writing Prompts

You are encouraged to respond to one or more of the following prompts, or to write freely on the topic. Submit 200 words or more to lewesseminar@gmail.com by the Monday before the session.

1. Tönnies distinguishes community (*Gemeinschaft*) from society (*Gesellschaft*) on the basis of the character of social bonds: personal, deep, and value-laden versus impersonal, transactional, and contractual. Do you experience this distinction in your own life? Is one mode of relationship more fulfilling, or are both necessary?
2. Modernity – understood as the forces of industrialization, urbanization, capitalism, and secularization – tends to dissolve inherited bonds of place, kin, and tradition and replace them with mobile, individualized, contractual relations. Do you think this dissolution is inevitable, or are there ways modern societies can preserve or rebuild forms of genuine community? What would that look like?
3. The word “community” is applied to groups as varied as neighborhoods, racial groups, religious congregations, professions, and online networks. Does the term mean something genuine in all of these cases, or does its overuse dilute it? What do these usages share, and where do they diverge?