RALF DAHRENDORF

Ralf Gustav Dahrendorf
1929–2009

The year 1944 was an even bleaker one for the Dahrendorfs than it was for most German families. Father Gustav had been sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for his activities in the German resistance, culminating in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler in that year. He had already been in trouble for having been one of the Social Democratic members of the 1933 Reichstag who had voted against Hitler's seizure of power. One of the family's sons, 15-year-old Ralf, was starving in a concentration camp, to which he had been sent for circulating leaflets to his contemporaries urging them not to fight in Hitler's army. That these two brave people survived the period at all was a remarkable stroke of fortune. But Ralf was released suddenly, in one of those impenetrable arbitrary actions to which dictatorships are liable, though he remained in hiding. In April 1945 the Russians arrived in Berlin, where the family was living, and Gustav too was restored to the family.

Gustav Dahrendorf, who had been a trade-union and political activist since his own teenage, now became one of the Social Democrats charged with negotiating workable political arrangements with the Soviet Union and German Communists in the divided city and country. He refused to accept the absorption of Social Democracy within the Russian-backed Socialist Unity Party, and in 1946 the British smuggled him and the family back to their native Hamburg, in the new western Federal Republic of Germany. He died in 1954. Ralf lived on to have an extraordinarily rich and diverse career as an intellectual, politician and administrator spread across Germany, the European Union, the UK and the USA, until his death in 2009.

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Stressful experiences in youth often leave a mark of restless energy and enduring discomfort, and it is possible to trace such a story in Ralf Dahrendorf's life. Two of his three marriages ended in divorce (his second and third wives both outlived him). He completed university studies in philosophy at Hamburg in 1952 with a doctoral thesis on the concept of justice in Karl Marx, and then went to the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he completed a second Ph.D. thesis in 1956, in sociology, on unskilled labour in Britain. By the following year he had also completed his Habilitation in sociology at the University of Saarbrücken, his *Habilitationsschrift* being the major treatise *Soziale Klassen und Klassenkonflikt in der industriellen Gesellschaft*,[1] translated into English within two years. By the age of 28 therefore he had become a full German professor, and had written a book that was to become a modern sociological classic. In the 1950s and 1960s he seemed almost to commute between posts in German and North American universities (Hamburg 1957–60, Columbia 1960, Tübingen 1960–4, Vancouver and Konstanz 1966–9, Harvard 1968).

Originally, like his father, an active member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)—he was even born on May Day—he moved to the Free Democratic Party (FDP) in 1966. (In the 1990s he transferred his political support to the British Liberal Democrats—at the time that he made it, a different kind of party from the FDP, despite their both belonging to the European Liberal family; for a time he sat as a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords, but later moved to become a crossbencher.) He had left academia in 1968 to become a member of the Landtag of Baden-Württemberg, then of the Bundestag in 1969, serving as a junior foreign minister in the SPD–FDP coalition of Willi Brandt for a year before leaving to accept a post in Brussels as one of Germany's European Commissioners. An ardent Europeanist, he nevertheless found himself at loggerheads with many of his colleagues in the bureaucracy, and wrote some anonymous articles attacking the Commission, the authorship of which was discovered. He was publicly attacked in the European Parliament, where he viewed with amusement—given his father's experiences with Communists—the fact that his only supporters were the Italian Communist Party.

He was 'rescued' from Brussels by the offer of the directorship of the LSE. There followed ten years of directing the institution where he had been a graduate student in the 1950s, several of whose great figures, and particularly Karl Popper, had been deep inspirations in his life. He became

[1] Ralf Dahrendorf, *Soziale Klassen und Klassenkonflikt in der industriellen Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart, 1957); *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (Stanford, CA, 1959).

embedded in British public life, giving the Reith Lectures in 1974, serving on official commissions (the Hansard Society's Committee on Electoral Reform 1975–6; the Royal Commission on Legal Services 1976–9; the Wilson Committee on the Functioning of Financial Institutions 1977–80), being elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1977 (of which he was Vice-President, 1982–3), and becoming a knight in 1982. As Sir Huw Wheldon, at that time chairman of the Court of Governors of the LSE, remarked, he had become Britain's most popular German since Prince Albert. When his term of office at the LSE ended, in 1984, he returned to Konstanz as professor of sociology, but came back to Britain two years later to become Warden of St Antony's College, Oxford for a 10-year term of office. He accepted British citizenship in 1988, and was appointed a Member of the House of Lords in 1993—where the peer who introduced him, Lord Annan, had been the 30-year-old major who had engineered the Dahrendorfs' escape from Berlin to Hamburg in 1946. He seemed now to have become thoroughly British, though he had never relinquished German citizenship. But at the last the earlier identity claimed him and, aged 76, he returned to Germany as a research professor at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin in 2005. Whereas the works of his lengthy 'middle period' were primarily written first in English, though often then translated into German, he never abandoned writing in his native language, and returned to it fully in his last years, producing at least five books and collections of essays that remain at the time of writing not translated into English.[2] His final months were spent living in Cologne, where he was welcomed as a visitor at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies.

As his final return to Germany probably showed, Ralf Dahrendorf's restlessness was not just a frequent revision of decisions about where and what to be. He occasionally revised that fundamental choice between the exercise of choice itself and surrender to the claims of loyalties and identities. This latter he called, in his contributions to social theory, 'ligatures'. But restlessness and even discomfort were not qualities that disturbed him; he believed in them. His vision of the good society and the good life were in no way whatsoever states of rest; creative conflict and disagreement were fundamental to it. He hated the idea of utopia—'Out of Utopia' was the title of one of his essays.

This was the fundamental issue that led him to abandon his own and his father's social democracy for liberalism, and later to speak with some

[2] Among them is a non-chronological, self-ironic autobiographical work, *Über Grenzen: Lebenserinnerungen* (Munich, 2002).

contempt of the social democracy of both Britain and Germany in the 1970s. By that time it had become, in Dahrendorf's eyes, more a matter of weary bureaucratic regulation, drab egalitarianism and neocorporatist evasion of conflict than wide-eyed utopianism—though it was also central to his analysis that drabness and utopia were closely related. To some extent this made him more in sympathy with the neoliberalism of the 1980s, and the waves of deregulation and increased inequality that have characterised both his countries and many others since. But he was deeply critical of the consequences for both the rich and the poor that neoliberalism created. At a profound level he never suppressed his social democratic instincts, and he remained, again consistently with his social theory, willing to accept and work with the conflicts and tensions that resulted from the relationship between them and his dominant liberalism; a tension with which he grappled, in another of his slightly quaint terms, in his discussions of the relationship between 'entitlements' and 'provisions'.

Throughout his life he maintained a poise between the academic and political worlds; it is probably not a coincidence that the two positions that claimed him with most consistency for a decade each—as director of the LSE and as warden of St Antony's—were posts that combined the two, the leadership of academic institutions. His formal political career was not successful, but he was active in many public institutions. He spent several years as a board member of the Ford Foundation, and after the fall of the Soviet bloc took a highly active role in many initiatives to assist intellectual and civil society institutions in central and eastern Europe. He was, for example, closely associated with George Soros's Open Society Foundation and Central European University in Budapest. Much of his writing too retained that increasingly difficult balance between academic seriousness and popular readability; he wrote frequently for newspapers, with regular columns in *Die Zeit* and *La Repubblica.* He was a genuine 'public intellectual'.

I have here set up an approach to understanding Ralf Dahrendorf's intellectual contributions that is rooted in his life and normative positions. One does this, not just because it was a life that obviously demands to be addressed as one of moral action in public life far more than is the case with those who remain in academia all their lives, but also because it was something else that he believed one should do. In his early, characteristically bold, work, *Homo Sociologicus*,[3] he condemns a social science that

[3] Ralf Dahrendorf, *Homo Sociologicus* (Cologne, 1959; second edn., 1965; English trans., London, 1973).

seeks to abstract human life so that it loses sight of the actual person. One can best approach his contribution in terms of four always related, always both scholarly and normative, themes, at each of which the above has already hinted: the rejection of both utopia and *homo sociologicus*; the wholehearted embrace of conflict; the exploration of entitlements and provisions; and of options and ligatures.

Openness versus system: against utopia and an abstracted view of mankind

A rejection of the search for utopia was common among perceptive individuals who had witnessed both fascist and communist forms of that search at close quarters. To Ralf Dahrendorf we can add, among others, George Orwell and Karl Popper. When the young Dahrendorf arrived as a doctoral student at the LSE in the exciting post-war atmosphere of the 1950s, Popper was already one its dominant presences.[4] Unlike Friedrich von Hayek, another formidable LSE presence with whom he is often linked, Popper did not respond to totalitarianism by fully embracing the free market. For him, all total systems were suspect; the important thing was to retain an open mind, to keep being willing to learn from many sources, and to move forward cautiously and variously.[5] He called his approach 'social engineering', thinking of the pragmatic adjustments that engineers make—a term which has come to be misunderstood as meaning just about the opposite. The young Dahrendorf absorbed this approach to the full, and its profound lessons informed all his contributions to social theory and stayed with him the rest of his life. In 1990, in his reflections on the final collapse of the Soviet regime in Eastern Europe,[6] he again rejected Hayek's insistence on the absolute priority of the free market as a search for a perfect closed world that was inconsistent with Popperian openness. In particular, he saw Hayek's desire to give constitutional status to a free-market economy as virtually and ironically a kind of totalitarianism—and also deeply anti-entrepreneurial. Much earlier, in 'Out of utopia', he had

[4] Dahrendorf describes that atmosphere in his own official history of the LSE (Ralf Dahrendorf, *LSE: a History of the London School of Economics and Political Science, 1895–1995* (Oxford, 1995).

[5] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London, 1945).

[6] Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: in a letter intended to have been sent to a gentleman in Warsaw* (London, 1990).

already grasped the paradox that economic theory's search for equilibrium was hostile to many of the things for which it seemed to stand: 'the assumption of certainty implicit in all equilibrium theories . . . turns out to be a deadly weapon against individual freedom in a living, changing society'.[7]

The search for utopia rested on a belief that somewhere was to be found a resolution to constant uncertainty. That, for Dahrendorf (and for Popper), was a profound mistake, as it envisaged a time of *stasis*, when debate, change and revision would no longer be necessary. That would be at best dreary and boring, and at worst a new totalitarianism, as those who questioned the reality of utopia would have to be dealt with.

As with Popper, this essentially normative position was linked to one of social scientific methodology. The German book-length expansion of 'Out of utopia' has a subtitle claiming it to be a work of methodology.[8] While Popper concentrated on outlining the rules of scientific method consistent with his approach of permanent scepticism and doubt, Dahrendorf turned much of his attention to criticising the search for system in sociological theory. Systems are, virtually by definition, closed, self-perpetuating: 'We have to choose between systems and the open society', he would write much later.[9] And in a particularly striking passage, commenting on Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*:[10]

> The battle of systems is an illiberal aberration . . . if capitalism is a system, then it needs to be fought as hard as communism had to be fought. All system means serfdom, including the 'natural' system of a total 'market order' . . .[11]

He was here addressing a certain 'Polish gentleman' with whom he had been discussing, in 1990, the collapse of communism and the rebuilding of economy, polity and society; the target in this passage is clearly Hayek, who was being much admired in central and eastern Europe. The much vaunted German social market, he reminded his reader, was not at all a designed system—though many writers have mistaken it for such—but an unplanned hybrid. (Fukuyama's idea of an end of history was of course highly uncongenial to Dahrendorf, who mischievously entitled a set of

[7] Ralf Dahrendorf, 'Out of utopia', *American Journal of Sociology*, 54 (1958), p. 148.
[8] Ralf Dahrendorf, *Pfade aus Utopia: Arbeiten zur Theorie und Methode der Soziologie* (Munich, 1967).
[9] Dahrendorf, *Reflections*, p. 61.
[10] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992).
[11] Dahrendorf, *Reflections*, p. 37.

late essays on politics from the fall of the Berlin wall to the Iraq war as 'The restarting of history'.[12])

An approach to social theory and research that was dedicated to expounding and discovering the properties of systems came therefore from the same thought world as the search for utopia. He expounded his critique of—at times attack on—this approach in a series of lectures and papers written in the 1950s and early 1960s, addressed variously to German and US audiences, the primary example of which was *Homo Sociologicus*.[13] This bold work, written when he was 30, was an attack on most of the luminaries of early post-war German social science, his supporting champions coming from Anglophone traditions.

In the name of a scientific sociology, the human person was being analysed as a series of roles, stripped of several layers until nothing is left—like an onion, though Dahrendorf did not make use of Kierkegaard's powerful image. Whole persons never appeared, just bearers of positions and players of roles; but the whole, free-will person was more than the sum of the roles. He saw a way out of the problem without sacrificing the methodological usefulness of the role concept. Roles became social when these were seen, not just as parts to be acted out, but as responses to expectations from others. Crucially, these expectations came in different orders of obligation indicated by different modal verbs: *Muß-, Soll und Kann-Erwartungen* (must, ought and can expectations). Freedom consisted in the whole person having a multiplicity of these and him/herself being able to exploit the differences between the different degrees of obligation. This was scientifically important, because it was only by grasping the whole person behind the cluster of roles that we could observe how people did this. We therefore needed a highly complex model of all activities and expectations of a person's roles, using opinion research and many other data sources. The person and the scientific abstraction must be kept alongside each other: science with art, history with sociology, psychology with sociology. Conflicts and contradictions among a person's roles and associated expectations would be particularly important. This would not make for a comfortable sociology; society should not appear to the sociologist as fact (*Tatsache*), he states, but even as a nuisance or irritant (*Ärgernis*).[14]

This was guidance for how to conduct social research, though after his London Ph.D. thesis Dahrendorf did not undertake any empirical research

[12] Ralf Dahrendorf, *Der Wiederbeginn der Geshichte* (Munich, 2004).
[13] Ibid., it and others were later all translated into English and published as *Essays on the Theory of Society* (London, 1968).
[14] Dahrendorf, *Homo Sociologicus*, p. 95.

himself. But there is also an undisguised, proclaimed moral purpose here. It is only through such an approach that sociology can be true to Kant's insistence on the moral quality of the human person. Dahrendorf was always a Kantian though, again like Popper, definitely not someone who received that philosopher by way of Hegel.

His singling out of German social science as particularly guilty of this losing sight of the human in scientific abstraction seems odd, given the directions being taken by Anglo-American linguistic philosophy and economics at that time and ever since, and the fact that the absolutely dominant form of sociological systems thinking in the 1950s was a US product, albeit one forged under strong German influence: the structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons. Dahrendorf was in fact well aware of this, and the young German visiting scholar to the US attacked this school too during the period when it was fully hegemonic, in a number of articles in US journals.[15]

In praise of conflict

Something else was really in his mind when he singled out his fellow Germans for criticism here, and it was a critique to be directed at the whole nation, not just its sociologists. The idea of utopia as at best dreary was associated for Dahrendorf with the idea of an 'extremism of the centre'. This paradoxical phrase had been devised by Seymour Martin Lipset,[16] one of that great post-war generation of US sociologists whom Dahrendorf met during his American visits. Extremists of the centre, often reacting against totalitarianism, sought to avoid conflicts and extremist threats by depoliticising social questions, by fudging rather than tackling challenges. This kind of behaviour was anathema to the young Dahrendorf and, as he journeyed to and fro across the Atlantic and the Channel, it seemed to him to represent a contrast between the political and intellectual approaches of his native Germany and the Anglo-American tradition to which he was increasingly drawn. It led him to develop his critique of the 'unpolitical German', first in a 1960 article in the first issue of *The European Journal of Sociology*, then in a very substantial book, *Gesellschaft und Demokratie in Deutschland*, translated into English soon afterwards.[17]

[15] See several essays in *Essays*.

[16] Seymour Martin Lipset, 'Social stratification and "right-wing extremism"', *British Journal of Sociology*, 10 (1959), 346–82.

[17] Ralf Dahrendorf, 'Demokratie und Sozialstruktur in Deutschland', *European Journal of Sociology*, 1 (1960), 86–120; *Gesellschaft und Demokratie in Deutschland* (Munich, 1965); *Society and Democracy in Germany* (London, 1968).

This work suggested that the search for quiet and the avoidance of all tension that characterised German politics, society and academy in the decades after the Second World War was not just a temporary reaction to the traumas of Nazism and the other nightmares of the first half of the German twentieth century, but a deep historical response to far earlier periods of turbulence (like the Thirty Years War) and a mass of different forms of autocratic rule. Germans had responded to this history through such movements as Pietism, that Lutheran search for inward piety that tended to ignore the social conditions surrounding it. The German Enlightenment, so daringly critical in its early manifestations, had become similarly inward-looking, a penetrating, inquiring life of the mind and spirit cut off from having any critical implications in the outside world, epitomised in the figure of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe becoming an obedient civil servant basking in court life at Weimar. The journey from *Sturm und Drang* to the comfort of Biedermeyer was one of escape, and a rather unhealthy form of escape. Ostensibly so different from the phenomenon of Nazism, Dahrendorf saw this as in fact its mirror image, as both shared a view that open conflict was dangerous. By the time one reached Hegel and the admonition that human striving can be sublimated into the work of the state, which then relieved individual persons of the need to reach beyond themselves unaided, the link started to become clear. Soon after Dahrendorf had published his book, the relatively young Federal Republic was briefly being governed by the Große Koalition of the two main parties, the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. This seemed to be the epitome of non-political, conflict-avoiding, German society; but he had also traced what he saw as excessive consensus-building in the preceding period of CDU–FDP government.

One might consider Dahrendorf's concept of social conflict as part of the discussion of utopia and system, as it is so much a logical part of the same coherent approach, but it represents such a significant component of his contribution to social theory that it merits a section of its own. As already noted above, he had burst upon the world with his *Soziale Klassen und Klassenkonflikt in der industriellen Gesellschaft* in 1957. Its translation into English by a US university press in 1959 was an extraordinary feat for a German still in his twenties. It was common for non-Marxist sociologists of that time, especially in the US, to deny the continued relevance of class; such denial was methodologically part of Parsonian system theory and politically part of the dominant atmosphere of a cosy, achieved utopia—both of course the reverse of what Ralf Dahrendorf believed in. But in its turn the Marxist image of class conflict comprising massive confrontations of hegemonic blocs was also profoundly unsatisfactory to him. At

one level he contested the *reductio ad minimum* of the Marxist idea of the proletarian, equipped with absolutely no resources other than those with which the Communist Party could furnish him. (His LSE Ph.D. thesis had been a study of so-called 'unskilled' labour in London, revealing that few if any workers were really so devoid of their own resources.) At another, and more obviously prominent, level, he considered that the Marxist concept of class and the consequent totality of its associated conflict could be valid only if people's relation to the means of production defined all their access to power resources. Once it was possible to have distinctions between economic and other forms of power that could produce such a phenomenon as a trade unionist mayor, this had broken down. Here Dahrendorf extended Max Weber's division of class into political, economic and social to include a myriad other dimensions.

Yes, therefore, for Dahrendorf Marxists were right to see conflict rather than perfectly functioning systems as endemic to industrial societies. But they were wrong to see such conflicts in massive, homogeneous, history-defining terms, as might perhaps have been appropriate in many forms of pre-industrial society. Conflict was endemic but fragmented. Further, both Marxists and functionalists were wrong in seeing the possibility of a society in which conflict would be transcended. Its endemic nature was permanent, and, moreover, this was not a matter for regret, as eternal conflict was the crucible of human creativity.

This was a quintessentially liberal position, not an anarchist one. The very fragmentation of conflict would produce, not chaos, but stability, as institutional boundaries prevented conflict in any one arena slipping over into and aggregating with others. This image of institutionalised conflict was common among post-Marxist scholars of the time, and it has had an enduring influence. Among political scientists it produced a sociologically enriched model of the older constitutional idea of pluralism. For sociologists it made possible a kind of reconciliation between Parsonianism (the idea of institutional constraints) and Marxism (continuing conflict). Dahrendorf's version of it was particularly vigorous and thoroughgoing, and also set up a model of institutionalised conflict in which conflict was not so much to be tamed as to be enabled to act as a major fount of human creativity. But these institutional boundaries did not exist in a kind of 'natural' way, like a Hayekian catallaxy; they were the work of human activity, building forms of separation and boundary that wrapped themselves around specific conflictual fields in the way that insulating material is wrapped around electric wires. Not every society had experienced this work of institution-building, but democratic industrial societies had a

strong chance of doing so. This is what Marx had not foreseen, which is why he had predicted the culmination of conflicts in one catastrophic class alignment; and it was in the interests of human freedom and creativity that Marx's expectation was false. *Class and Class Conflict* was certainly an anthem in praise of conflict, but conflict of a subtly constrained kind. It became one of the founding texts of today's post-Marxist study of institutions.

Although this work was to prove highly influential, it never succeeded in replacing a concept of class as fundamentally economic. The centrality of the economic in relation to other aspects of life, and the capacity of economic elites to maintain a strong influence over others, rendered the model of total fragmentation unrealistic. Dahrendorf acknowledged much of this twenty years later,[18] pointing out that his approach had been guilty of the empty formalism of which he was so critical. After 1957 his own use of class gradually reverted to its commonly accepted socio-economic meaning. We can understand why he wanted to fragment it and send it across a mass of different institutions when we see his idea in the general context of his belief in the benign role of fragmentation (up to a point to which we shall later return), and the avoidance of so defining people that they could be mobilised by a totalising political party.

While his concept of the benign nature of conflict was partly developed as a reaction to Germans' tendency to avoid it, and although he liked British and American societies for what he saw as their greater willingness to embrace it, he also made some shrewdly critical comments on the British approach. For the British, he wrote, conflict is a cup tie, a zero-sum game.[19] One certainly has a conflict, but then it is over; there is a clear winner, and the loser goes away—for a while. It applies very directly of course to British political ideas like 'first past the post' and opposing benches in the House of Commons. It is different from German proportional representation and fan-shaped parliamentary assemblies. But it is also different from Dahrendorfian conflict, where no loser ever goes away, the whistle never blows to signal the end of the match; because if they do, society starts to stagnate.

But the fragmented image of conflict almost does away with the idea of power; everyone seems to be so equally endowed with a resource of some kind. Dahrendorf was relatively soon to come partly to terms with

[18] Ralf Dahrendorf, *Life Chances: Approaches to Social and Political Theory* (London, 1979), ch. 3.
[19] Ralf Dahrendorf, *On Britain* (London, 1982).

this, in particular in his defence of Thrasymachus, the crude visitor who, in one of Plato's dialogues, gatecrashes one of Socrates' sessions and shouts that in the end everything is resolved by unequally distributed power.[20] Socrates gets rid of him quickly and treats him as a figure of ridicule. Characteristically, Dahrendorf takes his side, not only in terms of asserting the role of power as such, but also its corollary: that through their use of power, in conflict with each other, human beings can make their history; they are not in the grips of ineluctable forces. But the inequality of power remained a problem for him until he divided inequality into two forms, relating to 'entitlements' and 'provisions'.

Entitlements and provisions

He does this in the same place where he returned fully to the theme of conflict of his first book, thirty years later, in *The Modern Social Conflict*.[21] Dahrendorf's command of the English language was total; one could tell it was not his native language only because his grammar and syntax were more perfect than most of those for whom it is a mother tongue. One must therefore assume that the definite article in that title, which would be normal in German but sounds slightly odd in English, was deliberate, and that it implies identification of a specific conflict, characteristic of modernity. (The book was first written in English and only later did he translate into German.) This is therefore designed to be a major statement about conflict, and so it is. He addresses two kinds of conflict, for which he uses the slightly unusual terms: 'entitlements' and 'provisions'. The first refers to the struggle for rights to access things from which people have been barred by not being, or by being, members of certain categories. This is the familiar territory of the concept of citizenship as it was developed by another of the giant figures of early post-war London sociology whose influence he always recognised, T. H. Marshall. Conflict over provisions is the struggle for material goods; it becomes possible on a mass scale only in modern societies, where mass aspirations for large quantities of goods have become feasible for the first time in history.

There is nothing much original in the identification of these two objects of conflict. What is original is the insight into the conflict between these two conflicts and the changing dynamics in their relationship, and that is

[20] Ralf Dahrendorf, 'In praise of Thrasymachus', in *Essays*, ch. 5.
[21] Ralf Dahrendorf, *The Modern Social Conflict* (London, 1988).

what makes it 'the' modern social conflict. The time of writing, the mid-1980s, is significant. In the late 1970s Dahrendorf had shared the widespread tendency to denounce the bureaucracy, neocorporatism, dreariness and lack of opportunities for unequal entrepreneurial rewards that had become associated with social democracy. It was the furthest he had moved from the political position of his father and his own youth, and it was a position from which he would never subsequently resile. (As late as 1990 he was willing to tell a worried Polish social democrat—contemplating the wave of Americanisation that he expected now to engulf his country—that he wanted Poland and the rest of Central Europe to have 'trashy culture', because that is what people wanted. And he wanted them to have a tough wave of neoliberal economic policy before they started to rebuild some social values from scratch.[22])

However, by the mid-1980s he had seen several years of the reaction against social democracy in the West, the phenomenon that he and many others called 'Thatcherism', in action. Although the emergence of new material inequalities in general and the privileged position of persons working in secondary and derivative financial markets were then in their infancy and had reached nothing like the levels they attained by the early twenty-first century, Dahrendorf had perceived their direction of travel, one which he had in principle welcomed, and had not liked what he saw. His social democratic 'ligature' remained within his overriding liberalism. Also, although he had become highly critical of social democracy's achievements, he never relinquished his support for the value of citizenship, including Marshall's idea of the social citizenship of the welfare state, and regretted the contemporary trend to relate citizenship rights to willingness to work. Social citizenship rights, he reflected ruefully, were becoming seen as 'non-wage labour costs (and taxes)', and 'as reducing national competitiveness'.[23]

True as ever to his own theories, this discomfort was not a problem but spurred him on to new creativity, as he tried to distinguish between benign and malign inequalities.

The great struggles for democracy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had been struggles for inclusion and entitlement among excluded groups; and there was no end-point for such struggles other than equality. These were also necessarily collective struggles, in which one worked as a

[22] Ralf Dahrendorf, 'The strange death of socialism and the mirage of a "Third Way"', in *Reflections*.
[23] Dahrendorf, *The Modern Social Conflict*, p. 128.

member of a category with a shared identity. Social democracy's struggle for equal entitlements he regarded as having been achieved in 1968, with the collapse of nearly all remaining symbols of superior social status. Material struggles, conflicts over provisions, did not have a logical end, certainly not in a state of equality. Material struggles were also individualistic. Inequality in the pursuit of provisions was the spur to constant dynamism—an argument he had first made as long ago as 1961[24]—so insistence on equality of provisions had negative effects. But the search for an equality of entitlements, the constant extension of citizenship rights and domestication of power, expanded human scope and was therefore benign.[25] However, given an end to most (if not all) conflicts over entitlement, there would be, at least for a time, a concentration on conflicts over provisions, for which Thatcherism was far better suited than social democracy.

This all sounds superficially similar to sentiments expressed in a number of contemporary clichés. Is it not similar to saying 'equality of opportunity is fine, but not equality of outcomes'? Or 'people no longer need collective and political struggle, because they have achieved democratic rights, while there is no end to the shopping they can do'? But this was not the end of Dahrendorf's story; he never saw an end to history. He saw how the inequalities of provisions being intensified in British and American society (Germany had not yet started its own journey towards greatly increased inequalities) were creating new problems of entitlement among newly defined excluded groups. But—and here was a distinctive twist—their problem was made that much worse by the fact that the dominant class that was excluding them was what he termed and believed to be the 'majority class',[26] the victors of social democracy's earlier struggles. (It is notable that since the 1950s he had switched from seeing a multitude of classes to now being unable to see any class or entitlement differences between the financial and corporate elite and the mass of the population.)

Overall his perception of the complex links between entitlements and provisions comes fairly close to the concept of 'capabilities' that Amartya Sen was developing at the same time.[27] Dahrendorf acknowledges Sen's concept of 'entitlements', but had not embraced 'capabilities'. In Dahrendorfian terms, one could consider capabilities to constitute interdependent combinations of entitlements and provisions, without both parts of which a person

[24] Ralf Dahrendorf, 'On the origin of inequality among men', in *Essays*, ch. 6. The essay had earlier existed in a number of forms, in both English and German.
[25] Dahrendorf, *The Modern Social Conflict*, p. 124.
[26] Ibid., p. 154.
[27] Amartya Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam, 1985).

cannot act effectively. This stance incorporates but transcends the better known idea that there can be no equality of opportunity if there is extreme inequality of outcome. Neither Dahrendorf nor Sen is concerned with career opportunities alone, but with a far broader range of capacities to act and to be included in society. Of course, Dahrendorf does not offer us a model of a desirable balance between the egalitarian struggle for entitlements and the inegalitarian struggle for provisions; that would be utopian. He identifies the conflict for us, makes a few suggestions of his own, which now inevitably sound dated, but leaves us with a necessarily and desirably unresolved issue.

Options and ligatures

One form of what Dahrendorf saw as sources of desirable inequalities were the identities and loyalties that bind us, give us meaning and an escape from anomy. These identities and loyalties are not necessarily unequal in the sense of being hierarchical, though many are. But there is nearly always an inequality involved in saying that because A is a member of category X and B is not, A will have certain entitlements from which B will be excluded. B might of course be a member of category Y, which will have some different entitlements from which A is excluded; but X and Y do not necessarily offer equally valuable membership packages. The characteristic modern approach to this question is to combat the contention that category membership should have any implications at all. This abolition of identity-conferring membership can constitute one of the sources of drabness of which social democracy stands accused; under a communist system it reaches the point where no identities at all are permitted except those with party and state. Fascism tended to move in the opposite direction, and insist on identities, to the extent of denying the right to life of the possessors of some of them. It therefore ended in the same place, with no identities among the survivors. To add to the complexity of the issue, collective identities are often seen as egalitarian forces when set against the strivings of individuals who acknowledge no loyalties in their bid for personal advance.

The classic liberal solution to the dilemma is indeed to stress the rights of the individual stripped of all identity-conferring characteristics like gender, race or religion—the *citoyen individu* of French republicanism. In particular, the advantages of the individual in the gender-blind, race-blind, free market will be emphasised. One might have expected to find

Ralf Dahrendorf, the ultimate liberal, absolutely dedicated to personal freedom and liberation from constraints, to have fully endorsed that position. But he was a sociologist, not an economist, and where he saw a dilemma he would never let either himself or his readers escape either of its horns. The labels he placed on this particular pair of horns was 'options' (freedom, the ability to choose free from constraint) and the curiously named 'ligatures', the bonds that tie us, constrain us, but in so doing give our lives a meaning that the repeated exercise of choice prevents us from having. The idea of ligatures is most fully developed in his book *Life Chances*.[28]

The phrase 'life chances' has passed into everyday speech, but its origins lie in Max Weber's idea of *Lebenschancen*, where, as Dahrendorf points out, 'chance' has almost the opposite meaning from its current English usage by itself as closely related to luck as in 'games of chance'. Weberian (and Dahrendorfian) life chances are the socially structured probabilities that an individual will have certain experiences and opportunities rather than others. The individual is active and choosing among options, though by no means with infinite possibilities, but constrained by various social bonds or ligatures. Life chances are therefore a combination of options and ligatures.[29] But—up to a point—these ligatures are necessary to choice itself, as options without them are meaningless and make no sense. A strategy of expanding options without expanding, and perhaps even by destroying, ligatures will therefore have negative consequences for the quality of life. In *On Britain*, Dahrendorf reflected that the British might have come close to such a position.[30] Both the social democratic search for equality and Thatcherite neoliberalism pursued a 'universal insistence on discontinuity'; he even wondered whether the decline of the old class system would threaten values of cohesion and solidarity that it had once guaranteed.

Of course, if identity made it impossible for blacks in the USA to have equal civil rights with whites, one would fight against that implication, and accept that certain ligatures would be destroyed in the process. But what does one do when large parts of a young generation, white and black, in large cities, find their only identity in the anomy of a drugs culture? And what part did various destructive searches for options, not to mention pursuits of unequal provisions, play in the creation of that predica-

[28] Dahrendorf, *Life Chances*. This book was based on his Reith Lectures, 'The New Liberty', 1975.
[29] Ibid., pp. 29–30.
[30] Dahrendorf, *On Britain*, p. 36.

ment? One needs somehow to try to maximise options and ligatures together, and not present them as part of a zero-sum encounter. He therefore rejected the economist's welfare function, that sought to maximise what could be achieved by individuals within a taken-for-granted social structure, and sought what he called an 'active liberalism', 'one which anchors opportunities for human growth in patterns of social structure without overlooking the desirability of personal satisfaction'.[31] Again, this is an idea that comes close to Sen's idea of capabilities. Dahrendorf saw it as the nearest one might come to the idea of meaning in historical development, though it was no Hegelian idea, but a history made by a mass of actions by ordinary people, and by no means a unidirectional and irreversible one.

The idea of ligatures can be seen as related to that idea in *Class and Class Conflict*, that conflict arenas need forms of institutional protection to separate them from each other and ensure fragmentation and diversity. These varied components of social structure cannot be set in place by plan or *Diktat*, but it is possible for conscious political and social action to support or retard them. Dahrendorf developed his idea of a creative tension between options and ligatures as a form of 'active liberalism', distinguished from the 'passive liberalism' of defenders of the market order. But it is also a social democratic and conservative idea: social democratic in its concern for the impact of social structure on individuals; conservative in its fears for the consequences of destroying the albeit incoherent accumulation of past bonds and loyalties. What is typically Dahrendorf is the way in which he accepts the need to confront the inconvenient virtue of ligatures.

It is here that the biography of the man, never far away from the academic *oeuvre*, is most difficult to separate from it. He acted to exercise 'option' to change his life on a grand scale more often than most people can even contemplate: in personal relationships, in political identity, in career, in nationality. But he clearly also experienced the cost of that and knew what identity meant, if sometimes in its loss. How else do we explain the member of the British House of Lords, at the end of his life, leaving the country where he had won more appreciation than anywhere else, and returning to Germany, knowingly to die there? He never relinquished his pride in his father's bravery, even though he himself abandoned Gustav's political path. Towards the end of his period as director of the LSE, that institution where he had found so much intellectual identity in the 1950s,

[31] Dahrendorf, *Life Chances*, pp. 22–3.

he declared at a formal meeting 'I love the LSE.' A few weeks later at a similar meeting he recalled that a president of the German Federal Republic, Gustav Heinemann, had been challenged by a television interviewer to say whether he loved his country. The president had replied that he loved his wife; one could not use the same verb for a country. Could one really 'love' an institution?, Dahrendorf mused. Yes, he loved the LSE. He also loved the whole of London, not just its school of economics, and identified with it. He identified strongly as a European, while acknowledging that the European Union had not yet formed the identities to which most people could feel loyalty. This freedom-loving man understood the pull of ligatures.

Ralf Dahrendorf used to observe that very few decisions presented a case of 100 per cent on one side of the case and zero on the other. Indeed, 60/40 decisions were very common. Although one always had to go with the 60 per cent, the 40 per cent did not then go away. The options one had not taken remained to confront one from time to time. In his conceptual pairs—entitlements versus provisions and options versus ligatures—one sees that succinct observation set out at length and explored in difficult detail. He helps us give labels to and recognise the full implications of troublesome choices that we have dimly perceived. He never lost his optimism or belief in the potential of human striving, and continued careers as a man of action rather than of contemplation alone until very late in his life. But it was an intellectually informed optimism. Because he combined his worldly careers with unceasing reflection on the problems that Marshall, Popper, Weber, Marx, and in the background always Kant, had left him, he produced contributions to both sociology and practical politics that take us more deeply into the world's problems than most of the utterances of those who remain with just one of these career options; and he continuously felt the pull of both sets of those ligatures too.

Ralf Dahrendorf, born 1 May 1929 in Hamburg, died 17 June 2009 in Cologne

Personal postscript

I first encountered Ralf Dahrendorf when he came to the LSE as director and I was a very junior lecturer there. Shortly after his arrival he planned some changes to the administration that I and a few others thought would be damaging. We campaigned against him; we lost; and I was the most junior of the conspirators. He might have totally ignored me, so insignifi-

cant had it all turned out to be; or he could have been quite vindictive, as some would have been. Instead, however, he bothered to talk about the issue with me, and took a friendly interest in me from that time on. He was true to his beliefs and theories; conflict was healthy, even if it meant opposing him. During the various small student rebellions that took place at the School in those years he always acted in the same way. Whereas other directors might have taken disciplinary action, or smoothed everything over with bland avuncular words, Dahrendorf would engage in argument with the students, saying where he disagreed; combating them certainly, but in a manner that showed respect for their right to argue, to wage conflict, and to be treated as worthy sparring partners.

Several years later, by which time he had become a knighted figure of the British Establishment, I happened to ask him about some mutual acquaintance: 'Oh', he said, 'he has sadly become a *großer Ordinarius*'—a term used to describe a German professor who has become pompous and full of his own dignity. 'No one', I thought to myself, 'will ever be able to say that about Ralf.' The last time I saw him, a few months before his death, was at the Max Planck Institute in Cologne, where he had called in to chat to some of the doctoral and postdoctoral students there. He was telling them about the House of Lords and its quaint customs, in the way that members of that House do. But the mood of self-irony was clear; the slightly mischievous twinkle that was so often in his eye was prominent, though he was by then, in his own words, 'much reduced'. Never *ein großer Ordinarius*, but always *ein großer Mensch.*

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