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Dahrendorf as champion of a liberal society–border crossings between political practice and sociopolitical theory

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Abstract. Ralf Dahrendorf is internationally known for his work on role and conflict theory but rather less so for his large body of writing on liberalism, civil society, and the constitutional concept of freedom, little of which has been translated into English or other languages. Focusing on Dahrendorf's German-language publications, the present article addresses this gap. In developing his concept of liberalism and its implications for practical politics, Dahrendorf centrally invokes his theory of roles—the roles the individual is called upon to play—and strongly defends the individual against the behavioral expectations of society. And from his fundamental thesis of the productivity of regulated conflicts he concludes that such conflicts are fundamental to a free society: a society in which errors can always be revised. In his later publications, the social question of maximizing individual opportunities in life (or what he called life chances) became more central. Even after his death in 2009, Dahrendorf's ideas have continued to influence discussion about the development of a liberal society.

INTRODUCTION

Dahrendorf's key ideas for a liberal society are rooted in his far-ranging reflections on the relation of the individual to society and his observations on the process of transformation of pre-modern to modern society. His sociological and liberal principles were strongly influenced by Max Weber and by his critique of the structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons, as well as by Marxism and its derivatives in the form of neo-Marxism and "real" (i.e. historical state) socialism. However, the major influence on his theory of knowledge and scientific method, as well as on his political perspective, was Karl Popper, to whose thought he «owed more than to any other author» (Dahrendorf 1992: 183), particularly in his explication of liberal principles and his understanding of the productivity of social conflict (for greater detail see Kühne 2017). It was in this sense that he remarked «One could say I went to England as a socialist and returned as a liberal» (Dahrendorf 2002: 120) – the reference being to his period as a doctoral student at the London School of Economics (where Popper taught) in 1952-54. Especially in the 1960s, Dahrendorf was active and publicly visible in German politics, where he eventually rose to the position of EEC (Common Market) commissioner. He was convinced that, a decade and a half after its successful foundation, the German Federal Republic «needed reconstruction» (Dahrendorf 2004:

133), especially with regard to stabilizing its democratic structures and extending the educational opportunities of the underprivileged, and in 1967 – the time of Germany's first grand coalition government – he joined what was «then the only opposition party, the FDP [Free Democratic Party-the German liberals]» (Dahrendorf 2004: 133). He had already stood as a liberal candidate for the city council in Tübingen in 1963, then served for a while as advisor to the government of the State of Baden-Württemberg (Micus 2009), led at the time by the conservative Christian Democratic Party (CDU). Also in 1963 he began working for the weekly *Die Zeit*, where he was instrumental in giving that newspaper «its specific leftish-liberal character» (Meifort 2015: 306). The «liberals of the left» – as Dahrendorf (1994c: 105) affirmed with reference to the Federal Republic's first president, Theodor Heuss (a leading member of the FDP) – «are the progressive minds, people who are not content to defend what has been achieved but realize that freedom always needs forward defense».

The present article outlines the understanding of liberalism that informed Ralf Dahrendorf's sociological and politological thought as it evolved in his extensive original – and as yet untranslated – German writings on that subject. His reflections on role theory and the historical development of societies, accompanied and infused by his reading of Marx, Weber, and Popper, fall broadly into two phases: first his defense of the rights and the development of the individual within the democratic body politic, and then his «positive» (Berlin 1995 [1969]) focus on the maximization of individual life chances. These will be taken in turn and followed by a brief summary placing them in the historical context of the development of German liberalism.

POLITICAL LIBERALISM AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF HOMO SOCIOLOGICUS

This section will outline Dahrendorf's critique of what he saw as a twofold danger for the development of a liberal society: on the one hand the social consequences of conforming to predetermined roles and on the other the increasingly bureaucratic organization of society.

Homo sociologicus: a player of pre-formed roles

First published in 1958, and translated by the author himself into English in the early 1970s, Dahrendorf's *Homo Sociologicus* represented a milestone in his thinking and continues to influence sociological discourse, especially in German-speaking countries, with its emphasis on role-playing and the relation of the individual to society. «At this interface», Dahrendorf wrote, «stands *homo sociologicus*, the human being as the bearer of socially pre-formed roles» (Dahrendorf 1968b: 133). His intention in writing the book was to introduce role theory into the German – and wider European – sociological debate, and at the same time to consider the question of deviation from given social roles (Dahrendorf 1997).

Role formation takes place in the process of socialization – the introduction of the individual into society – with the concomitant internalization of that society's norms and values (Dahrendorf 1971 [1958]). Dahrendorf summarizes social roles as «the bundle of behavioral expectations connected in any given society with the holder of [specific] positions» (ibid. 33). These expectations are underpinned by sanctions «with whose aid [the society] enforces its rules: if you don't play your role, you will be punished; if you do, you will be rewarded – or at least not punished» (ibid. 36). And, he continues, the resultant conformism is a universal characteristic of societies. Sanctions can be positive as well as negative: «Society can bestow medals and impose prison sentences, it can acknowledge merit, grant prestige, and commit individual members to banishment» (ibid.). But there is an asymmetry here: «One can forego rewards, orders and medals, but to escape the force of the law, or even social disgrace, must be an extremely difficult undertaking in any society» (ibid. 37).

To clarify the individual impact of society's norms, roles and values, Dahrendorf coined the term *homo sociologicus*: an abstraction, and as such devoid of individuality, but nevertheless open to conflict both within and between its separate roles – hence the distinction between intra- and inter-role conflict, for the human being is always called upon to play a number of different roles. But social life is complex, and the expectations behind these roles are not all on the same level: their binding (as well as sanctioning) force is graded. In this way the structure of social expectations imposed on the individual becomes the central pillar of social stability, and for Dahrendorf as a theoretician of conflict and change a central object of sociological critique.

The "irksome fact" of society: homo sociologicus and the restriction of personal freedom

Not content simply to analyze role-playing as the interface between society and the individual, Dahrendorf views it in light of the normative requirement – such were his liberal convictions – to maximize individual opportunities in life. This led him to state that while

the individual «*is* the social roles one fills, these roles *are*, for their part, the irksome fact of society» (Dahrendorf 1968b: 133; original emphasis) – irksome because they not only offer but also restrict possibilities of personal development, and indeed do so with sanctions. In this sense Dahrendorf follows Heinrich Popitz in suggesting that «the concept of role *expectation* should be replaced with that of role *imposition*» (Dahrendorf 1971 [1958]: 6; original emphasis). But roles do not entirely determine individual behavior, for there is an area «in which an individual is free to shape their roles and not always necessarily to behave in the same way» (Dahrendorf 1968b: 151). And inasmuch as they «perceive society as above all irksome» (ibid.), individuals will seek to broaden, or at least to shape their roles. Here Dahrendorf follows the classical liberal principle that individuals must protect themselves from the expectations and demands of society, and must be empowered to do so by education. However, before roles can be extended or shaped, before the individual learns to present them skillfully like an actor on the stage (Goffman 2011 [1959]), they must be learned, along with their sanctions: «Only by imbibing the laws of society – laws that are external to the individual – and transforming them into a determining principle of action, will an individual be bonded into society and reborn, as it were, as *homo sociologicus*» (Dahrendorf 1968b: 163).

The loss of democratic participation: homo sociologicus and the other-directed individual

Allied to the enhancement of individual life chances, another issue that took an increasingly prominent place in Dahrendorf's publications was the defense of the liberal state. For Dahrendorf, the central pillar of that state was the democratic individual, whose social character he described as «loving controversy, but reining it back in recognition of the fact that individual interests have inherent limits that define the constitutional rules of the game» (Dahrendorf 1972: 194). What he repeatedly observed, however, was a loss of participation in democratic processes, and he attributed this in no small measure to the spread of what he called the "other-directed" individual. Closely related to *homo sociologicus*, this contrasting type is conceived a good deal less abstractly. Dahrendorf takes up David Riesman's (1950) description in the following terms:

> *He wants to be loved, not opposed. But democracy means articulating your interests, even when they are emphatically individual. The other-directed individual, however, is not permitted any personal interests. His radar is constantly scanning the horizon for the ideas, attitudes and interests of others. He wants not only to be loved, but to be like those others* (Dahrendorf 1972: 195).

Following Riesman, Dahrendorf opposes other-directed to self-directed people who are not prepared «to surrender their private wishes and interests» (1972: 197) to the ideas of others, whether these be friends, relatives, neighbors etc., or – under a totalitarian regime – «the rules and expectations of party and state» (ibid.), an inclination to conformity that another liberal thinker, Isaiah Berlin (1995 [1969]), had formulated in similar terms. For Dahrendorf the other-directed person is «the twin-brother of *homo sociologicus* […] a role-player, a self-alienated person whose thoughts and actions have become the calculable product of social norms and institutions» (1972: 211). It is here that his critique of Riesman cuts in: following the scientific postulate of objectivity, Riesman viewed the other-directed individual too uncritically. After all, it is scarcely more pleasant «to live without freedom in a world of other-directed theory than in a real totalitarian state» (ibid. 213).

A society of the other-directed will know neither change nor renewal: «Change and renewal must be initiated by someone; but none of those who constantly look over their neighbor's shoulder before they dare say or do anything will ever create anything new» (ibid. 203). It was from this point that Dahrendorf launched his critique of bureaucracy – of a state «that runs of its own accord» (ibid. 207), avoiding all possibility of change. Change, after all, «is neither automatic, nor particularly pleasant» (ibid.). In such an entity, social action will follow «the constitutional conservatism of the bureaucracy» (ibid. 208); but that will lead to a crisis, for the state that runs of its own accord «is the structural mirror image of […] a democracy without freedom» (ibid. 209), where the principle of equality (or perhaps better 'sameness') has been stretched far beyond the classical liberal rights (freedom of speech, of assembly etc.) to a point where it can effectively annihilate individual freedoms (ibid.). Classically, freedom means for Dahrendorf «the ability to choose from a differentiated offer» (1974: 9), which presupposes a society that provides such an offer. The social drive for equality, however, is opposed to differentiation and variety: of its nature it diminishes «the offer available for individual choice» (ibid.). A political implication of this classically liberal position is that a plurality of concepts must be available from which the individual can choose – strategies proposed, for example, by different parties to meet the challenges of the day. Dahrendorf sums up his position in the axiom: «A free society is a maximally differentiated society» (ibid. 10).

The potentials and perils of social inequality

Reflecting his emphasis on variety, Dahrendorf sees economic and social inequality as in principle positive: «Inequality is a productive force in the social process because it stimulates initiative, and with it change» (1983: 183). But this is true only up to a point: the point where inequalities become more destructive than productive. He later put it like this: inequalities are socially tolerable and supportable "if, and only if, they do not place the winners in a situation where they hinder others from participating fully in society, or in the case of poverty, hinder them from the exercise of their rights as citizens" (2007a: 86). The "new poverty" in industrial societies affects all those who suffer the deprivations of incompleteness: they live in incomplete families (mostly single parent families without a father); they have incomplete work (casual or part-time employment has returned under a wide variety of names); they are incomplete citizens (perhaps immigrants or asylum-seekers) (Dahrendorf 1991a: 251).

Especially when different dimensions of incompleteness – a concept that definitely calls for further discussion – combine, fundamental civil rights can be radically undermined. This can have legal as well as economic implications: e.g. denying immigrants voting rights as well as limiting their (or other people's) earning capacities to the point of jeopardizing their economic stake in society. Here the social bias of Dahrendorf's liberalism comes through: in John Rawls's terminology (Rawls 2001) he is concerned with *substantial*, not just *formal* equality of opportunity.

Resisting the dangers of bureaucratization: the contours of Dahrendorf's liberalism

Another aspect of the spread of bureaucracy is, for Dahrendorf, the substitution throughout the political system of an increasingly homogeneous body of "professional politicians, civil servants, advisers, accredited lobbyists, journalists, university professors, and assistants" (Dahrendorf 1972: 106) for the traditionally amateur politicians whose roots lie firmly within the society they represent. This has brought a radical change in the character of politics. Instead of being autonomous and ascribable, decisions reflect the «inherent laws and principles of a system» (ibid. 107). Power is differentiated and decentralized, «a process [being] split in the exercise of power into so many part-processes that it becomes difficult to recognize the whole in any single part» (ibid. 125). And the ruling class has correspondingly dissolved into a «market of veto-groups, […] reducing power to the administration of power over material things, or simply into the power of the law» (ibid. 126) – an analysis in which Dahrendorf again follows David Riesman (1950).

He sees the creeping bureaucratization of Western states from the late 1960s (and especially the 1970s) as deriving from different but related processes. Among the reforms of the late 1960s was the expansion in higher education and the concomitant promise of social advancement: no wonder that, for the graduate generation of that time, which had become skeptical of private industry, «the 'public [sector]' was a virtual synonym for the 'desirable'» (Dahrendorf 1994a: 194). But the reforms that brought greater democracy, at the same time – albeit as an unintended consequence – «increased the volume of governmental activity» (ibid.) After all, «Democracy means committees and meetings, and committees and meetings not only consume time, they also produce a lot of paper; democratization means establishing courts of appeal for every decision, and these, too, produce files» (ibid. 195), for all decisions must be carefully reasoned, documented, and archived. This gives rise to a paradoxical situation: «Advocates of non-hierarchical communication and transparently reasoned value judgments might think they have replaced authoritarianism with universal participation. What they initially achieve, however, is universal subjection to the subtle torment of bureaucracy» (ibid.).

As another reason for this bureaucratization Dahrendorf identified the « firm conviction of the majority» – themselves largely either in the service of the state or dependent on state transfers – «that security, ordered advancement, reliable and not over-taxing work, and the predictable depersonalization of all authority» (ibid.) represented the summit of life's values. It might not be innovative, challenging, or exciting, but life along those lines was predictable, sustainable, and able not only to satisfy modest middle-class aspirations but to secure them against the overweening claims of an expanding social state. For the state grew in appetite and volume as politicians fed it with tasks and offices: «Everywhere governments claimed the right and competence to solve every sort of question, and indeed that was expected of them» (ibid. 198). That no government and no bureaucracy could ever actually meet such expectations guaranteed that «disappointment would be waiting at every corner» (ibid.). And the other side of the coin was that growing expectations and claims brought growing levies and taxes – above all for those who enjoyed security.

The critique of socialism and bureaucracy as formative principles of Dahrendorf's liberalism

Dahrendorf's argument with Marxism runs right through his writings: on the one hand the development

of Marx's idea of fruitful conflict, on the other the critique of Marxism, neo-Marxism, and socialism, which serves repeatedly as a foil against which to set his own presentation of liberalism. This regularly returns to the key issue of the relation between equality and freedom, as in the brief definitions he gives of socialism and liberalism in *Konflikt und Freiheit* [Conflict and freedom]: While socialism aims «at the social fulfillment of the promise of equality contained in the rights of citizenship», the enduring aim of liberalism is to «widen the range of opportunities open to the individual, not only in kind but also in extent and rank: liberalism seeks difference, because difference means freedom» (Dahrendorf 1972: 222). Liberalism, in this new formulation, is no longer preoccupied solely with the establishment of basic civil rights for all – freedom of speech, of government by coalition, of participation in free, equitable, and secret polls etc. (see also Knoll 1981) – it is «concerned above all with the fullness of developmental possibilities available to the individual; the main thrust of the new liberalism is therefore against the system of bureaucratic organization and alleged rationality that curtails this fullness» (ibid.).

Dahrendorf views the difference between new and old liberalism against the background of changing social challenges: «while old liberalism sought above all to address the bonds of moribund tradition, new liberalism addresses the new bonds of organization, bureaucracy, and technology: in short the system of laws allegedly rooted in the nature of things that nowadays deprives the individual of a voice» (ibid. 223).

For, as he later observed, the state harbors at every level «an inclination toward totality: however much one stresses that the state is nothing other than the people who constitute it, it is always seeking to extend its power» (Dahrendorf 1994b: 729). Moreover, state bureaucracy «provokes an expensive frictional loss in the redistribution of wealth» (Dahrendorf 1987: 66), because «the problems facing social policy […] are in the nature of the case individual, but bureaucratic solutions are general, so they often fail to meet the individual need to which they are directed» (Dahrendorf 1983: 104). For the individual this means that «instead of caring helpers and prompt assistance, what one encounters is waiting rooms and forms and officials—and often enough demeaning procedures» (Dahrendorf 1987: 142). In this situation many people develop a paradoxical attitude toward bureaucracy (as well as other social phenomena) both approving and disapproving it: «They know certain social procedures are necessary for them to be able to enjoy their basic rights as citizens, but at the same time they develop a growing resentment against any form of paternalistic authority, in this case that of an impenetrable bureaucracy» (Dahrendorf 1981: 7).

The critique of bureaucracy leads Dahrendorf to his definition of the role of liberals toward social – in particular political and administrative – institutions: «Liberals are not primarily advocates of social institutions, they speak for the forces that drive these institutions forward and keep them on their toes» (Dahrendorf 1979a: 165). In principle, liberals are in two minds about the state, and Dahrendorf later pointedly observes: «I would even go so far as to say that liberalism cherishes a seed of anarchy, the hope that people will arrange matters for themselves, that the market will make the regulatory hand of the state redundant» (Dahrendorf 1983: 66). Still later he comments more clearly on the radical liberal distrust of power and its relation to anarchy: «Liberalism is not anarchy, but anarchy is in certain respects an extreme form of liberalism» (Dahrendorf 1991b: 386) – a dictum that invites closer scrutiny of Dahrendorf's concept of liberalism. The following section will be devoted to this topic.

Aspects of a free society: market economy, liberal rights, and the dangers of grassroots democracy

For Dahrendorf, inequality is a characteristic of society: «The root of social inequality lies invariably in the relation between the roles people play in society and the expectations and sanctions attached to them» (Dahrendorf 1966: 24). Inequality, in other words, is inseparable from the status of *homo sociologicus*. The challenge to the establishment of a legitimate social order is to moderate this inequality to meet the requirements of «equality of civil status» (Dahrendorf 1972: 276) – or what Dahrendorf had earlier called «equality of social rights» (Dahrendorf 1961: 383). A later text makes this more explicit:

> *in as much as the chance to govern and the reality of its legitimation through assent – in political terms passive and active suffrage – become generalized, rule and subjection to rule lose their quality of arbitrary compulsion and become compatible with equal opportunities for all to enjoy freedom* (Dahrendorf 1972: 276–277).

A presupposition of this development is, however, that «power that is not rationally founded […] » – and Dahrendorf exemplifies this as «political power on the basis of economic power» – « […] is illegitimate and must be abolished» (ibid. 277). In other words, economic status and possessions on their own do not grant legitimacy: they need the consent of the ruled – including

acknowledgment of inherent situational conflict and of the right of conflicting parties to organize themselves, e.g. in the form of trade unions. This plays clearly on the conception of a society in which market activities are subject to legal limits and controls – not, however (if it can be avoided), to economic activity by the state. Nor should it be thought that liberal advocacy of the free market is based, as the critics of neo-liberalism have often suggested (see e.g. Harvey 2005):

> *on the elevation of economic efficiency as the only standard of value. It is based rather on the judgment that the market economy is the only economic form compatible with the fundamental individual right to freedom, as well as being the form that provides the best conditions for the exercise of individual responsibility in the shaping of one's life.* (Kersting 2009: 29).

Economic activity, for the liberal, is compatible par excellence with maximizing life's opportunities: «Economic activity serves the welfare of humankind, and the economy works better, the more it contributes to that welfare – to the greatest good of the greatest number» (Dahrendorf 1980a: 47). The market Dahrendorf has in mind is characterized by a high level of decentralization – in other words by the participation of a large number of players – and is subject to political controls. Where basic rights are involved, it is permeated by state organizations and parameters, but not to the extent that it becomes a social market with liberal leanings, for its inclination is always toward conflict and competition rather than to cooperation and harmony (see Gratzel 1990).

The defense of liberal rights in a representative democracy is primarily the task of politics, but also of the public. But this public, Dahrendorf observes in 1969, is problematic inasmuch as it is «an object of manipulation, passive, incapable of finding and forming its own roles, let alone of uttering protest» (Dahrendorf 1969: 3). Public apathy, he writes – expressing the position of much German political and academic opinion – must be combated with political education in schools and universities, lest civil society become the defenseless plaything of power (this, put very briefly, was also the position of Habermas, 1962). The public must be awakened to the need for political participation. Dahrendorf rejects, however – and here one again sees his liberal antecedents – any tendency toward "fundamentalist" democratic totalism: «It is an inherent aspect of freedom that the public does not consist of a set of individuals equally motivated toward participation» (Dahrendorf 1972: 229). And some ten years later, in an interview with Franz Kreuzer, he makes his critique of grassroots democracy more explicit. «The idea of a democracy that grows from the grassroots, in which all decisions rise like vapors from below and are legitimated in the end because they have arisen like vapors, is absolutely foreign to me» (Dahrendorf 1983: 68). Grassroots democracy is, for him, a Utopian concept that «makes innovation extremely difficult» (Dahrendorf 1983: 68) because it so often leads to paralysis. This is as true of the Marxist Utopia of an achieved flawless society after the final revolution as it is of «Habermas's yearning for a society free from the 'discourse of government,' a society of consensus achieved through permanent voluntary communication among equals» (Dahrendorf 2004: 21) – both are «redolent of escape from the success-oriented world of reality» (Dahrendorf 1994a: 321), and as such they «miss their mark, which was to guarantee freedom within an open society» (Dahrendorf 1969: 4). A dozen years or so later he expresses this in the axiom: «Utopia is always illiberal – it leaves no room for error and its correction» (Dahrendorf 1980b: 88).

The democratic fundamentalist call for the «unlimited public activity of all citizens»(postulated for the time after the end of class conflict) is itself an error for the simple reason that initiative requires initiators, and these must somehow rise from the mass of a less active public; if they fail to do so, the actual initiative – while maintaining equality – must be withdrawn from them (Dahrendorf 1972). Two decades later Dahrendorf deepens his critique, arguing that the idea of a universally active citizenry «places the accent above all on the duties […] connected with membership of a society» (Dahrendorf 1972: 123); but although such duties, «like compliance with laws or paying taxes», undoubtedly exist, «they should be as far as possible reduced» (ibid.; see also Dahrendorf 2004). Whether to stand for election, to withdraw into the private sphere, or to pursue economic activity – in other words to be part of the active, passive, or merely latent civil society (or, indeed, to change from one role to another) – should be a matter of free individual decision.

The argument against universal political activity also led Dahrendorf to reject government by referendum: «Plebiscites are a result of the growing weakness of the intermediate regulatory instances between the people and power». Moreover, he continues, to demand that people «make impromptu decisions» is to invite "snapshots" without the comprehensive discussion that is «a basic feature of democracy» (Dahrendorf 2003: 75) – a comment of poignant topicality for Europe fifteen years later. Finally, a referendum «can be used and abused as a test of popularity for politicians and governments, as it of set purpose eliminates all intermediate instances» (ibid. 76).

The constitution of freedom

«Liberalism is of necessity a philosophy of change»: in light of what has been said about the dynamic force of conflict, Dahrendorf's aphoristic statement (1979b: 61) can scarcely be surprising. On the second key value of liberalism, enshrined in its very name, he writes: «People are free inasmuch as they can make their own decisions. The state of freedom is one in which compulsion is reduced to a minimum. The aim of liberalism as the politics of freedom is to achieve the greatest possible freedom within the given limits» (Dahrendorf 2007b: 26). But this «absence of compulsion» (ibid.) should not be thought of as a state in the sense of «the mere possibility of fulfilling [one's wishes, decisions etc.]: freedom is the activity that makes life's chances real» (Dahrendorf 2007a: 8) – a point to be developed in the next section.

Politically, Dahrendorf again focuses here on «the defense of individual integrity and the extension of individual life chances. Groups, organizations, and institutions do not exist for their own sake but as a means to the end of individual development» (Dahrendorf 1979b: 135). He understands the concept of freedom, then, as constitutionally individual, albeit with social impact: «It holds for individuals and at the same time has a universal outreach. But only individuals can be free. So when one speaks of a 'free people' or a 'free country' these are metaphors – unless one is explicitly referring to the 'constitution of freedom» (Dahrendorf 2007b: 26). Another area of collective attribution in which Dahrendorf has similar reservations is guilt. Citing the example of Nazi crimes within the perspective of collective German guilt, he distinguishes three categories: «Collective responsibility, certainly; also collective shame; but when crime and punishment are turned into collective attributes they not only exculpate individuals from their share in evil, they are no longer relevant judgments but simply metaphors» (Dahrendorf 2004: 79).

The development of individual self-determination is bound up with a society regulated by law that allows its members the opportunities they need in life. In this respect "liberalism is a civil and civilizing process" (Dahrendorf *et al.* 1993: 94): the 'constitution of freedom' is rooted in the constitutional framework of such a society. Accordingly, Dahrendorf distinguishes between 'constitutional' and 'normal' politics:

> *Constitutional politics is concerned with the framework of the social order, with the social contract, so to speak, and its institutional forms. Normal politics, on the other hand, is about the direction taken by activities within that framework in accordance with prevalent interests and preferences.* (Dahrendorf 1992: 46).

The demand for privatization of the steel industry, for example, is a matter of 'normal' politics, but the decision «to institute free and equitable voting is a matter of constitutional politics» (ibid.) and, he continues, there is a fundamental difference in the available options: in constitutional politics these might be called bipolar, while in normal politics they are plural: «In constitutional politics there are no two ways – or, rather, there are only two ways – that of freedom and that of unfreedom, while in normal politics hundreds of options are conceivable, and as a rule three or four are relevant for choice» (ibid. 47). Hence to treat questions of constitutional politics as if they were questions of normal politics risks endangering their defining principles, which for Dahrendorf lie in the defense of freedom. But he also rejects the opposite approach, which he sees in Hayek's conception of liberalism (essentially a strict limitation of state competencies to internal and external security and the creation of a reliable legal framework for the market and society):

> *I cannot criticize Hayek for his constitutional politics and would not attempt to do so; but he has a deplorable tendency to turn all politics, above all economic politics, into constitutional politics. Like Hayek, I have no patience with those who attack the fundamentals of freedom, but in contrast to him I do not find it difficult to tolerate those who, for example, want to give the state a bigger say in economic politics, or demand a massive transfer of tax revenue for social purposes, even if I do not share their opinions* (ibid. 48).

ALLEGIANCES, RIGHTS, AND LIFE CHANCES – THE DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Where the previous section foregrounded Dahrendorf's conception of a liberal society and the dangers to which it is subjected, the present section will address his ideas on the development and contours of civil society. In this context, the sociological notion of 'ligatures' – social-emotional bonds of allegiance – becomes particularly relevant. This will lead naturally into Dahrendorf's consideration of social rights and their relation to duties and obligations. Finally, further attention will be paid to his concept of life chances, which, prominent in his thought since the 1970s, gains politological and philosophical definition in his reflections on civil society.

Developmental successes of modern society and the loss of allegiances

Dahrendorf's defense of liberal modernity derives not only from his rejection of revolutionary Marxism

and conservatism, but also from the contrast he makes between the achievements of modernity and the centuries that preceded it, centuries when most people lived «in a recurrent cycle of rural poverty» (Dahrendorf 1987: 192). The wealth of the privileged few accumulated from the work of the many, who devolved to them a certain measure of responsibility, for example in the protection of the community against external enemies. But, in general, pre-modern life was shaped by an «endless repetition of birth and decay, summer and winter, hard labor and simple pleasures» (ibid. 193). Early modernization, too, was marked by acute social need and "intensifying class conflict between entrepreneurs and workers" (Dahrendorf 1965: 60). Nor were the slow achievements of modernity, especially that of freedom, equally distributed, either spatially or socially: «In the 19th century lack of freedom arose above all from the enormous disparity between the workers who offered their labor and the landowners and industrialists who held the capital» (Herzog 2013: 72). This was also Marx's starting point in his critique of early industrialization.

Yet – and this is a conviction that runs right through Dahrendorf's sociology – as society modernized, the abuses of early industrialization were mitigated to the point of disappearance, while the achievements of modernity were maintained and extended. Medical science, food provision and hygiene all improved, and modernization brought alleviation of the physical rigors of labor and a higher life expectancy throughout society. In town and country, the spread of political democracy and civil rights, the growth of personal living space, the enhancement of privacy, the universalization of education – and with it a new access to art and music "through modern methods of reproduction" (Dahrendorf 1987: 194) – benefited all. Another achievement was the free exercise of religion: «The Catholic claim to hegemonically organized religion had to yield, as out of the ruins of an absolute state, sole beatitude-promising Church, and static mercantile system a new society arose—not just any society, but bourgeois civil society» (ibid. 230).

Despite its early setbacks, Dahrendorf (e.g. 1987) associates one aspect above all others with the process of modernization: its widening of life chances. New opportunities opened «often enough through the breaking of ligatures. Mobility meant that family and village were no longer communities of fate but increasingly communities of choice» (Dahrendorf 1979b: 52). Ligatures, for Dahrendorf, are the «deep bonds that underpin and give meaning to options» (Dahrendorf 2007a: 45), the strong social allegiances on which personal value judgments rest and which cannot be shed without risking anomie (Dahrendorf 1983). Ligatures are «structurally preformed fields of human activity in which the individual is placed by social position and role» (Dahrendorf 1979b: 51). And they are emotionally charged: «Family, ancestry, home, community, church» (ibid.)—all of these produce bonds of duty and of belonging, bonds that Dahrendorf proceeds to classify in both spatial and temporal terms:

> *Space in general, i.e. nature; space in the specific sense of nation; space in the narrower sense of region, landscape, parish; social space in the sense of family and local community. Time in general, i.e. 'life'; time in the specific sense of history; time in the narrower sense of one's generation, personal age and experience; social time, i.e. the social construct of 'human life'* (ibid. 107).

There is a fundamental difference in Dahrendorf's terminology between ligatures and options: «Ligatures are given, options are sought» (ibid. 108). And options are rooted in time and place: «Temporal independence and spatial mobility […] are two basic forms of social option» (ibid.).

Maximizing life chances: a liberal norm

Central to Dahrendorf's sociology and his understanding of the mission of a liberal society is his concept of life chances, which he explains as «choices, opportunities» that require two conditions: «the right to participate and an offer of goods and activities from which to choose» (Dahrendorf 2007a: 44). He points out that the concept of 'chance' itself also has two sides: on the one hand, with reference to Max Weber (1976 [1922]), it means «the structurally founded […] probability of a [specific] behavior» (Dahrendorf 1979a: 98; see also 1994a; 1968b) – i.e. the chance that someone will do A or B. On the other hand, in the sense of 'opportunity', the term refers to «something that an individual can enjoy, the chance to pursue an interest» (Dahrendorf 1979b: 98). Far from guaranteeing success, life chances «only concretize into real biographies if they are individually and vigorously pursued – or else abandoned» (Lindner 2009: 20). But the pursuit and satisfaction of interests is inseparably linked to «social relationships […]. Chances are in themselves socially conditioned, they are ordered by social structures» (Lindner 2009: 20) – or as Dahrendorf puts it: «Life chances are possibilities of individual growth, the realization of abilities, hopes and wishes, and these possibilities are established by the social environment» (Dahrendorf 1979b: 50). They are determined on the one hand by allegiances, on the oth-

er by available options, the «alternatives of choice and action embedded in social structures» (ibid.).

While allegiances are relations and, as such, represent the «foundations of action» (ibid. 51), options «demand decisions and hence are open […] toward the future» (ibid.). Allegiances (ligatures) and options are, therefore, mutually conditioning (see ibid. 55) – indeed, when it comes to maximizing life's options their interrelations are constitutive: «Ligatures without options are oppressive, whereas options without bonds are meaningless» (ibid. 51–52; see also Dahrendorf 1980c on the subject of working hours). Allegiances make mere empty chances into «chances with sense and meaning – life chances» (Dahrendorf 2004: 51). And in his later work Dahrendorf points up the ambivalence of the world of such allegiances. For liberals, this is «a minefield, for most deep structures have an absolute quality and only reluctantly allow shades of gray: either you belong or you don't, and if you don't, you have no claim to rights» (ibid.).

Life chances and freedom are related but not identical, for life chances alone do not constitute freedom: «Freedom is a moral and political challenge; life chances are a social concept» (Dahrendorf 1979b: 61). He expresses the relation in the following terms: «The development of life chances is the mission of freedom – the full exploitation, as it were, of the potential of a society» (ibid. 131). The enhancement of life chances is, then, a liberal ideal, and some years later Dahrendorf enlarges on this proposition:

> *Liberals want people to become citizens: individuals able to choose among consumer goods, political groupings, lifestyles, and goals. Hence liberals have always opposed not only traditional bonds of every kind but also any attempt to impose new ones. They opposed the mixing of church and state, the privileges enshrined in law, the rigid concept of family. They supported an easing of the divorce laws, and were against the form taken by the law on abortion. Liberals wanted mobility, so they opposed social policies that tied individuals to their birthplace or place of residence, just as they opposed feudal or quasi-feudal bonds between master and worker. For almost two centuries [now almost two-and-a-half] liberalism has pursued a politics of enhanced options and opportunities in people's lives* (Dahrendorf 1983: 123–124).

So far as history is concerned, Dahrendorf again follows Karl Popper when he writes that «it [i.e. history] has no sense, either a priori or even *a posteriori*» (Dahrendorf 1979b: 24), a thesis from which he draws the conclusion that «we must give it a sense if we want to – and we must want to, for the question cannot be avoided» (ibid.). The sense we can give history lies for Dahrendorf precisely in «increasing people's life chances» (ibid. 26). Gratzel places this in a firm philosophical context: «The free society is […] the decisive moral precept of political action, for nobody is in a position to recognize the just society» (Gratzel 1990: 12) – a point that underlines the connection in Dahrendorf's thought between political concepts and their underlying theory of knowledge. However, rather than pursuing this connection, Dahrendorf himself is content to argue that liberalism can be measured by its success in expanding life chances: «The more life chances people have, the more liberal is their society» (Dahrendorf 1983: 37). And he sees this as engendering «a spirit of contradiction against all fixed and firm order, […] distinguishing liberals from conservatives and socialists alike» (ibid. 136). Summing up, Mackert makes the point that Dahrendorf's detailed, concrete differentiation of options and ligatures «adds a dimension of inherent meaning […] and, in a more theoretical perspective, emphasizes his assumption of socially structured choices being made by socially active people» (Mackert 2010: 413).

Against the background of the maximization of life chances, Dahrendorf – in contrast to both conservative and socialist thinkers – judges the medium of money in its social impact in a markedly affirmative way: «Money offers life chances: we can do something with it. Spending or not spending money is a meaningful choice. It harbors possibilities, opportunities» (Dahrendorf 1979a: 49). The positive attitude to money and the market economy runs through Dahrendorf's entire work, even if the historical development of capitalism since the 1980s, and in particular the underlying causes of the post-2008 financial crisis, aroused his criticism (see especially Dahrendorf 2009b; 2009c; 2009a). The transition from the thrifty capitalism of savings to a prodigal capitalism of credit (which he had already criticized in 1984) incited him to remark that «many honest mercantile principles of good housekeeping […] have been thrown overboard» (Dahrendorf 2009b: 23).

Civil society vs. authoritarian society

In line with his theory of liberalism, the task of society – or, more concretely, of the state – is in Dahrendorf's eyes the expansion of the range of individual life chances. He puts it like this: «Life chances are always chances to share in the envisioning of new possibilities, and this cannot be taken for granted» (Dahrendorf 1983: 73), for such chances depend radically on the existence and efficacy of civil society. Without «the structures of civil society, freedom is a reed shaken by the wind» (Dahrendorf 1994a: 45); it is these structures that

«embody resistance against authoritarian and totalitiarian forces» (ibid.).

As well as the rule of law, Dahrendorf sees «the autonomy of [its] many organizations and institutions» (ibid. 69) – autonomy in the sense of independence «from a center of power» (ibid.) – as the second central characteristic of civil society: as examples he names municipal self-administration and independence of the universities. On the individual level he defines a third characteristic as that of polite, tolerant, and non-violent relations among the citizenry, complemented by civil pride and courage. It is especially for these last two qualities that totalitarian rulers abhor nothing more intensely than «civil society which stands up against their arrogance» (ibid. 70).

The authoritarian or totalitarian ruler is not, however, the only danger facing civil society; equally insidious is the threat of anomie: «People lose their footing – the hold that only deep cultural bonds can give – and in the end nothing works any more, nothing matters, indifference rules» (ibid. 76). The consequences of anomie – which Dahrendorf, following Durkheim, understands as «the abrogation of social norms in the wake of economic and political crises» (ibid. 240; see also Dahrendorf 1985) – are especially devastating for the third characteristic of civil society defined above, because the more self-assured people are in their social and cultural allegiances, «the less defensive is their behavior and the more open to social concerns and impulses» (ibid. 87).

In his later writings, beginning in 1984 with the book *Reisen nach innen und außen* (Inward and outward journeys) and continuing through to his late work (e.g. *Die Krisen der Demokratie*, 2003: Crises of democracy), Dahrendorf focuses on the crises that recurrently beset democracy, and on its need for rejuvenation. «If I were to rewrite *Die Chancen der Krise* [Crisis as chance] today», he commented only a year after its publication, my analysis would be a good deal more somber" (Dahrendorf 1984: 64). That analysis had made four main points:

1. Modern economies can no longer «guarantee current levels of welfare» (Dahrendorf 1984: 64), with the result that real incomes regularly drop and public expenditure is cut, especially in the social sector.
2. Modern societies can no longer «guarantee law and order» (ibid.).
3. Modern administrations can no longer «guarantee open (democratic) constitutional procedures» (ibid.).
4. Modern states (or confederations of states) can no longer «guarantee external security» (ibid.).

Like Colin Crouch (2004), he ascribes the loss of legitimacy on the part of political actors and institutions in Western societies to the growing influence of particular and private interests and a corresponding disenchantment with politics among the population at large. In a concise *resumé* of the benefits of democracy and the forces threatening it, he connects this political apathy with the rise of globalism. Thus, although democracy can provide valid answers to three key aspects of social organization – it can effect change without violence, "control the ruling class with a system of checks and balances" (Dahrendorf 2003: 9), and foster institutions that enable citizens to share in the exercise of power – nevertheless these achievements «only work in a particular context, namely that of the traditional nation states» (ibid. 11). Globalization has produced a «global class» (Dahrendorf 2000) of economic, political, scientific etc. decision makers whose horizon is explicitly international and rejects national concerns and interests. Dahrendorf estimates this group as representing about one percent of the population, but their influence is far wider, as many people take on their values, preferences and behaviors (Dahrendorf 2003). Moreover, the «inevitable destruction of traditional social solidarity» (ibid. 23; see also Dahrendorf 2009b) resulting from their obsession with personal enrichment constitutes a further peril to democracy.

However, many opponents of globalization equally endanger democracy by asking the impossible, a point Dahrendorf made on several occasions by means of an anecdote: «Confronted on a visit to Washington by an [anti-globalization] demonstration whose spokesperson claimed to represent the people, the then Italian premier, Giuliano Amato, replied: "No, I represent the people. The people elected my government, not you, to represent them"» (Dahrendorf 2003: 25).

While «the demonstrators claimed to speak for the people of the world» (ibid.), only elected national parliaments and their federal or provincial subalterns, Dahrendorf observed, actually possess a mandate from the people.

Already in *Die Krisen der Demokratie* (2003) he showed himself aware of the problem of legitimate representation in an increasingly digital world. Thanks to the Internet, he observes there, both private and public organizations can «powerfully and aggressively mobilize people» (Dahrendorf 2003: 25), but this makes all the more acute the question of the representation of their will. He perceives the danger of populism first and foremost in its subversion of ordered (parliamentary) debate: «Populists pursue that process [i.e. parliamentary disempowerment] consciously, with the aim of bypassing debate and establishing a consensus on the basis of the more or less deeply cherished feelings of the populace, whether real or alleged» (ibid. 90). Yet «their incapability when it comes to governing is obvious» (Dahrendorf

2004: 317), for the *métier* of governance is not diffuse but ordered conflict, not eruptive but regulated protest, and the appropriate arena for this is parliament (ibid.).

Accordingly, Dahrendorf sees the current predilection for referendums as an expression of the helplessness of politicians; at all events it undermines the principles of parliamentary democracy, in which, before an election, political parties «present their interests and opinions within a framework of agreed principles» (Dahrendorf 2010 [2004]: 196) and, once elected, come to decisions «after open debate in parliament» (ibid.). Putting this in a perspective that is at once idealist and realistic, Dahrendorf observes that until the inauguration of Kant's «cosmopolitan global society» - which he sees as «in the end […] the only convincing, practical response to the fundamental equality of all human beings in rank and rights» (Dahrendorf 2004: 48)—the institution of parliament remains «no more than a surrogate solution of geographically bounded and, as such, imperfect civil societies with all manner of limitations, restrictions, privileges, and disadvantages» (ibid.). Nevertheless, national states «in which the civil rights of all citizens can be effectively guaranteed, […] are the best we have yet been able to attain» (ibid.).

Ten years earlier, in the same tone, Dahrendorf describes the «heterogeneous national state» as «one of the great achievements of civilization» (Dahrendorf 1994b: 751). A further reason for his intense affirmation of this societal form is its sole right to the exercise of force, for he sees «the ability to sue for their enforcement» as the «precondition for the effective validity of civil rights» (ibid.). Hence the heterogeneous national state is «a value that liberals must defend» (ibid.), and one toward which they can justly feel a certain patriotism – constitutional patriotism, that is (Dahrendorf rejected any patriotism based on homogeneity or equality, which he viewed as a principle of exclusion). Constitutional patriotism in its classical sense is infused with «pride in the spirit of the law and […] the institutions created in its name» (Dahrendorf 2004: 54). For although it may not be possible «to love one's government [...] it might be possible to feel a special attraction toward a certain type of division of power founded on reason and furnished with checks and balances» (ibid.). Patriotism of this sort is «a thing of the mind, not the heart: to live in concord with the deep structures of society and to pass these on to future generations satisfies no common need" (ibid.). It means defending the norms and structures of society, and necessarily implies that "the liberalism of the future […] will be a decidedly institutional liberalism» (Gratzel 1990: 23).

Another aspect of the globalism/nationalism debate noticed by Dahrendorf (and with him by others like Anthony Giddens) is the growth of a yearning for «the sureties of immediate neighborliness» (Dahrendorf 2003: 27) in the form of localism or regionalism. Dahrendorf sees this on the one hand as harboring great potential for the shaping of the immediate environment, on the other as an expression of «the search for homogeneity so crucial to our age: the wish to be among the like-minded, those that resemble one in every respect» (ibid.), and this he views far more critically as directly counter to the democratic principle that progress is generated from difference.

In spite of his reservations about the form and extent of the state and its organizations, Dahrendorf, as Gratzel observes, considered «a minimal state […] as indispensable» (Gratzel 1990: 26), not only because the inherent potential for conflict in the human community calls for institutional regulation, but also because the marketplace needs supervision, and because life chances must be distributed justly. For all these reasons, the state must «intervene in the otherwise self-regulating processes of the market, the [ideal] upshot being a symbiosis of rational market and planning procedures – albeit weighted in favor of the market» (ibid.). For Dahrendorf, representative democracy – despite its current crisis – is the political system ablest to fulfill these tasks, «above all because we urgently need forums for ordered and considered debate» (Dahrendorf 2003: 79).

The measure of the just distribution of life chances within a society is «the extent to which the individual groups in the various sectors of society are similarly represented» (Dahrendorf 1974: 8). That Dahrendorf saw education as the prime means to achieve this end underlines his political position as a social liberal: education was for him a civil right (Dahrendorf 1968a), and he was, in fact, one of the leading figures behind the expansion of education in the late 1960s and 1970s in Federal (i.e. at the time 'West') Germany.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

Ralf Dahrendorf's conception of a liberal society combines classically liberal positions – a focus on the individual, avoidance of uniformity, critique of bureaucracy, active rejection of authoritarian and totalitarian tendencies in society – with the insights gained from sociological research: the enhancement of life chances, the rights on which these are based, the rejection of global Utopias. This led him in various circumstances to make outspoken political demands: for instance,

as regards what he saw as the civil right to education. Emphasizing the values of difference and multiplicity, he campaigned against both the de-politicization and the excessive politicization of society: both he considered similarly detrimental to freedom of choice.

Typical for Dahrendorf – and his debt to Karl Popper in this respect has already been mentioned – is the combination of scientific and political theory. This found expression in his demand for an «institutional liberalism»: «Because we cannot know [i.e. recognize, absolutely speaking] either what is true or what is just, both science and politics require vital debate» (Dahrendorf 1972: 315), a debate that can only be conducted on the basis of common rules. And the social constitution embodying these rules must not just seek to correct and prevent error, but must positively encourage the development of new approaches and ideas. Dahrendorf's preferred 'constitution of freedom' had in this sense to «steer a course between the Scylla of total democracy and the Charybdis of autocracy without running aground in the shallows of bureaucracy which at every turn hinder the passage of progress» (Dahrendorf 1994a: 96). Drawing together the key aspects of his sociological, political, and philosophical thought, he defined what he called the «new freedom» - a freedom appropriate to our times – as «a politics of regulated conflict and a socio-economic policy that maximizes individual life chances» (Dahrendorf 1980b: 15). Accordingly, as Alber has observed, his notion of liberalism «cannot be reduced to economic liberalism – or rather economic liberalism is [for him] a very crippled version of liberalism» (Alber 2010: 24).

Consistently with a concept of freedom that focused on extending and enhancing life chances, Dahrendorf did not see economic growth as a patent recipe for solving social problems; after all, employment growth has long since been decoupled from economic growth (see Alber 2010). Indeed, one can speak in this context of a new class conflict, with a majority in the affluent West «seeking in a double sense to secure privileges that automatically exclude others» (Alber 2010: 24): on the one hand against an underclass of the long-term unemployed and/or unemployable, on the other hand against migrants from other cultural backgrounds. «Where inclusion is called for, exclusion is practiced» (ibid.)—a diagnosis whose relevance, given the way refugees and migrants are currently treated in Western societies, can scarcely be overstated. The answer to the conflicts simmering within increasingly multicultural societies cannot be a lessening of plurality, for difference and plurality are the preconditions of progress (see e.g. Dahrendorf 2004; Kühne 2018, 2019 forthcoming); it can only lie in the regulation of conflict by increasing the life chances of all concerned, natives and immigrants alike, who are competing for poorly paid, precarious jobs. In the end the answer must lie in education – education understood as a basic civil right.

Here it becomes evident that Dahrendorf's thought went considerably beyond that of the so-called "Ordoliberals", for his concern was not «to erect a Red Cross station behind the front-line of capitalism, but to found and propagate a civil right to participation in the market for everyone» (Gratzel 1990: 14). In this sense "a thread running through Dahrendorf's entire work" Gratzel (ibid.) was the development of a social solidarity characterized by freedom, an enterprise in which liberals must take care to avoid the two extremes of «conservative insistence on inviolable institutions and […] unrestrained reformism that casts dependability to the winds» (Dahrendorf 2004: 176), destroying every allegiance. But these were not the only threats to freedom that Dahrendorf saw, for life chances can be curtailed not only by a lack of solidarity, not only by a creeping bureaucracy, but also by political attitudes that routinely take refuge in the absence of alternatives – an analysis he made almost half a century ago (in 1972) but which strikingly applies to the current state of the German Republic with its hostility toward either social or political change. Nor has the critique he simultaneously leveled at the European institutions – a bureaucracy whose arrogance and aloofness from citizens' concerns is equaled only by its imperviousness to legislative control – lost any of the relevance it possessed at the time he made it.

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