

*Ralf Dahrendorf: attraverso i confini.* Ralf Dahrendorf: across boundaries

The more Ralf Dahrendorf saw of Europe and the countries and continents beyond its borders, the more this led him to the view he recorded in his *European Diaries*, that ‘this merely confirms just how close the ties that unite us Europeans are’. Ralf Dahrendorf’s life story is characterised by an unending criss-crossing of national boundaries, something which is mirrored in his intellectual style, in which he often cut across the boundaries between different spheres and activities. Following his own imprisonment as an adolescent in Nazi Germany, and his experience of the suffering of so many others, his concept of liberty and the experience of an ‘open society’ were ideals that had to be achieved and maintained, and never taken for granted. Open society requires democratic institutions and the alleviation of social conflict, as well as the potential for change and the expansion of life chances. Dahrendorf dedicated his life to the realisation of these ideals, whether as a politician committed to ‘strategic change’, or as a social scientist attentive to the changes occurring in European society. These two spheres, distinct in terms of their objectives and content, were brought together by Dahrendorf as he took on the role of ‘public intellectual’. His interpretation of this role also had a bearing on his vision of Europe.

Ever since as a young sociology student he chanced upon the thinking of Max Weber, he took seriously the problem of the relationship between scientific knowledge and human values. How can we avoid being side-tracked by prejudice or ideology in the search for knowledge? And, moreover, what tools are available to us to prevent those abstract ideas, although so vital a part of knowledge, from leading us to points of view that reject change and alternatives, instead of opening up, as they should, multiple choices in terms of social and political practice? Answering such questions, according to Dahrendorf, has a direct implication for the intellectual, who has a ‘moral duty’ to perform a public role. This duty comes from the fact that the intellectual speculates upon and draws stimulus from practical problems and, simultaneously, he or she has an influence on real life because he creates a debate about that which is taken for granted. Knowledge and practice share a cyclical relationship, and yet the public intellectual must not confuse one with the other, otherwise he or she may contribute to the closure rather than the opening up of new ideas, to encouraging a single vision rather than a range of different perspectives. In brief, this would cause ‘closed’ rather than open societies. Dahrendorf found a way around this by allowing himself to be guided by the principle of uncertainty and submitting his own ideas to public examination and therefore to potential criticism. Through adhering to this principle he formed his own relationship with Europe.

Europe and liberty are completely inseparable for Dahrendorf. It was for this reason that in 1971, during his time as a European Commissioner, he published a series of articles written under the pseudonym Wieland Europa in *Die Zeit*, in which he calls for a 'second Europe', a Europe of the people. In these articles he criticised the bureaucratic nature and lack of democracy inherent to the European institutions, provoking negative reactions in Brussels and almost costing him his position.

Dahrendorf's political commitment to Europe goes right back to his youth and his involvement in the Saarland plebiscite campaign of 1955, when he tried to form a liberal party (in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the word) that would be genuinely pro-European. This same impetus led him, in 1967, to throw himself into active politics within the German Free Democratic party, which he later left to join the European Commission in 1970. Even though the disillusionment that followed led to him to resign his role of Commissioner, he did not give up on the European Project. Acutely aware of the difficulties and constraints inherent to the integration process, in his work *Why Europe?*, he defines himself as a 'sceptical pro-European' who is alarmed by the 'gap that exists between rhetoric and reality in Europe and who wants to bridge that gap'.

During the 1980s he could see fresh potential in the Commission's initiatives under the leadership of Jacques Delors and he envisaged a path that could lead to a widening of the area of European citizenship. It is by strengthening the social component that we will return the European project to the task for which it was conceived, namely that of improving people's life chances. In his works *1989: Reflections on the Revolution in Europe* and *The Reopening of Society* [Der Weiderbegin der Geschichte] he clearly outlines the positive atmosphere that favoured the events of 1989, whereby 'Europe has renewed faith in itself'. And, for some time, even Dahrendorf renewed his faith in a Europe that had always led him to believe that, one day, unification would almost certainly happen. In the early 1960s, in his work on the *Sociology of Contemporary Germany*, though an analysis of the differences between the social and political institutions of the FRG and the GDR, he envisaged the potential scenarios that would occur if reunification should happen. Then, in the early 1970s, in *The New Liberty*, he stated, almost prophetically, 'I have always felt that 1984 could not last, that authoritarianism was bound to produce a liberal revolt against it, a 1989 so to speak'.

According to Dahrendorf, both the idea and the reality of Europe have helped stimulate democracy, in particular with regard to its innovative capacity to incorporate different systems. He sees this as a strong point, which has helped ex-communist countries in their search for change. For such

countries a return to Europe means, above all, the chance to be themselves without having to conform to a hegemonic ideal. In this critical phase, in which ex-communist countries are beginning to make institutional changes in order to establish democracy and a market economy, a lot of reactionary forces are also gaining ground, which could impede democratisation and the construction of an open society. In this context of structural transformation, membership of the European Union assumes new meaning and potential as a guarantee against antidemocratic forces.

But in Dahrendorf's view the primary role of Europe is not about giving priority to economic integration. Instead, the EU should contribute, over and above anything else, to the establishment of 'transnational' civil rights in the context of a 'cosmopolitan civil society'.

Dahrendorf, the public intellectual, was closely involved with and participated in the adoption of democratic policy in 're-opened societies'. This is perhaps rooted in one of the most distressing events he experienced in his lifetime, namely his father's escape from Russian-occupied Berlin. Having initially been liberated by the Russians, Dahrendorf's father, who was a social democrat and Nazi resister, then became the enemy once again because of his opposition to the eradication of the social democratic party by the communist regime.

Dahrendorf was not, however, a supporter of the way in which the EU expansion process was taking place. In the early 1990s, when the Maastricht Treaty paved the way for monetary union, Dahrendorf began to harbour doubts about the impact such a process might have, above all with respect to the structural problems that the European states were suffering from and which they found it difficult to face up to at a national level. *Why Europe?* contains a radical critique of the single currency policy: 'Even if Monetary Union happens this doesn't mean everything else will follow (This is a clear error of judgement by the European functionalists!).' Even before the project began he asked himself what impact a single currency might have on key issues such as unemployment, market competitiveness and welfare reform. A single currency, Dahrendorf maintains, tends to aggravate the issue of unemployment, making it difficult to adopt Keynesian policies to tackle it and not allowing for other plausible solutions. Furthermore, it would not resolve the issues surrounding market competitiveness, as this is linked to structural organisation and is not a monetary issue: while there may be multiple benefits for a handful of companies if the costs of transactions are reduced, this does not tackle the root cause. It would not even promote the reform of state welfare, since governments would use the constraints of the Maastricht Treaty to justify cuts in welfare spending, which could be a useful tactic to legitimise their choices but has nothing to do

with the single currency. Neither would it meet the people's demands for stability and legitimacy, nor guard against new threats, serving instead to instil yet more disenchantment. An even greater danger perhaps is that of partial monetary union, which 'would contribute to a disintegrated rather than an integrated Europe'. This would, indeed, provide fuel for conflict between members and non-members over the use and distribution of resources, widening the gap between the core and the periphery. At the centre are countries like Germany and France: 'One thing that is unforgivable is when the *ins*, the so-called 'core nations', push their own interests as those of Europe.' Dahrendorf does not criticise the creation of a single currency as a concept, but rather the way in which it has been managed, which has allowed national interests to take precedence over the common good: 'The Euro has little to do with Europe.'

Dahrendorf 'suggests' both long and short-term solutions. In the short term it is necessary to critically evaluate the way in which the EU balance sheets have been created and managed up to this point. This is particularly true when considering the way finances are still allocated under the increasingly outdated agricultural policy. Equally urgent are the revision of procedures governing the distribution of European funds, which are often used inefficiently or at worst fraudulently, and the introduction of criteria to distinguish investment spending from 'remedial spending'.

Next, a mid to long-term outlook is needed to take on the issue of democratic legitimacy of the EU. This issue is heightened by policies the EU adopted during the expansion process, and it remains unresolved. As Dahrendorf has indicated on more than one occasion, the EU itself would fail any application for membership if it wished to join the Union, as it lacks the basic democratic criteria that it in turn requires from countries to be considered as membership candidates. This is symptomatic of the complete absence of a genuinely *European* political class or political parties, coupled with the inherent impossibility of expressing popular opinion, since Europe essentially lacks a *Demos*. And so, the EU continues to be structurally rigid and bureaucratic, resisting change. Ultimately, its member states continue to base their decisions upon national interests.

The top priority for Europe, according to Dahrendorf, is the creation of a legal community, capable of protecting the civil rights of its own citizens, whereas the EU 'has always remained an economic community'. Such a radical change of course would imply a review of the current equilibrium between the EU and its nation states, since the former is called upon by its members to engage in 'protectionism in the widest sense of the word, and not just in the economic sense'.

Europe can only face its future challenges by preserving and sustaining the institutions of civil society in terms of greater civil and human rights. And these rights, in order to be effective, must be entirely universal: ‘so that they are thought of as universal and understood universally.’

In the early 2000s, Dahrendorf participated widely in the debate on Europe, conducting a busy schedule of conferences and public appearances, and through his contributions to press publications. Following the failure of the project for a European constitution, he is preoccupied with the rift between the real Europe, present in the everyday lives of its people, and the Europe of rhetoric and grand visions. This rift, according to Dahrendorf, needs to be mended urgently if we want to prevent the fall of the European organisation as a whole.

Following the acceleration of the expansion process, which was not as extensive as he had hoped, and the intensification of the economic, financial and political crisis, Europe showed new, seemingly irreparable divisions. As he had conjectured previously, monetary union, which involved just eleven countries, brought about the construction of a new core and has clearly been problematic in terms of popular consensus. The EU’s citizens now associate it not just with a loss of national sovereignty, but above all with increasing consumer prices. Expansion has awakened concrete fears in some long-standing members about the loss of EU funding, as well as more abstract fears about immigration and competition from new member states. Dahrendorf, at his public appearances, argued with great efficacy that things should not be left to develop automatically and that procedural regulations, or the ‘the stability pact’, is ‘stupid’ and needs to be ‘corrected’. In his view it is not possible to bridge this rift and there needs to be a political anchor to the single currency: ‘We need a new Delors,’ he states in his polemical essay *Daily Europe and Sunday Europe*.

Perfectly in keeping with his role as a public intellectual, Dahrendorf takes a nonconformist position, not accepting the idea, prevalent within public opinion, of an irredeemably divided Europe. Instead, he saw recent events, above all the new membership of Central and Eastern European countries, as a vital step towards ‘active diversity’ in Europe. Where previously division in Europe caused the ‘terrible history of the twentieth century and those that preceded it’, this new phase marks a move away from division to the acceptance of diversity, which in turn has the potential to become the EU’s driving force. There are many different political and institutional cultures, types of economic regulations, political and electoral systems and approaches to welfare across Europe. In contrast, there is an unsettling trend towards increased social inequality, also taking shape differently in different European societies. Dahrendorf doesn’t think twice, therefore,

about deconstructing the Lisbon Strategy, with its 'bizarre' idea of a common policy for all European societies to create the world's 'most competitive' economy. He was convinced that the adoption of a strategy that required everyone to follow a single model of political and economic regulation would lead nowhere, not least owing to the dramatic changes it brought to the world of work and the fact that it proposed a lowering of taxes, which would lead to welfare cuts. Therefore, he was not surprised when, five years after the strategy was introduced, several of the states which had not adopted the planned measures had achieved comparatively more. However the results were extremely diverse, as one would expect, and it would be difficult to see this in a purely positive light.

One of Dahrendorf's final messages as a public intellectual, a man who had always taken the European project seriously, was the need to promote 'active diversity in Europe'. The key implication of this is the awareness that Europe will always be composed of diverse cultures and economies. It is the EU's task to create rules where this diversity can become an overall advantage, allowing us to actively use diversity and not side-line it as an issue to be dealt with. In other words, Europe's diversity is a potential asset, a resource rather than a limitation. This has repercussions too for Europe's role on the international stage, because a Europe based upon active diversity would not aspire to become one of the great world powers. Rather than acting as a separate centre of power and instigating new divisions, if Europe were to open up to a cosmopolitan world, those differences that once caused conflict, would instead fuel innovation and progress.