

Interview with Lord Ralf Dahrendorf

# Liberty is the Key

Arkadiusz Sobczok/Agenja Gazeta



Lord Ralf Dahrendorf is a German-British sociologist, philosopher and politician. His books, especially *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (1959), ensured him a place as one of the 20th century's leading liberal thinkers

**Academia:** Lord Dahrendorf, you are renowned in Poland as the author of the theory of social conflict. How would you evaluate the explanatory power of your concept from the current perspective?

*Lord Ralf Dahrendorf:* Well, to some extent, the theory of conflict, which I developed in various books from the 1950 onwards, was related to a period in which there were social classes. These were visible groups which were

organized in order to defend their own interests. And there is no question that such groups are harder to identify today than in earlier periods. Today the characteristic of our society is that there is an underclass, people who are disadvantaged. But it is not the disadvantaged who usually begin the creative conflict of the time. Rather, it is those who have new ideas, new perspectives – the rising classes if you will. Therefore, I would look today for the application of that theory to what I sometimes call the “global class,” that is to say those who know how to benefit from the process of globalization. Those in the information technologies and the other modern vocations, who were responsible for the great electronic bubble of 2000 – which has burst – but who are still moving forward and exploiting the opportunity of globalization. So it is in that area that I would seek the core of today’s conflicts.

**Would you see scientists or intellectuals as a part of that new “global class”?**

*Scientists certainly belong to that global class. But, of course, intellectuals never fit wholly into that picture because they are “free-floating”; they are able to defend and promote the global class but they are also able to defend other groups, which are now on the defensive. So intellectuals are not the core of the conflicts of today, but the interpreters of these conflicts.*

**Should Poland – a society in its transitional stage – be more aware of the conflict than a developed western democracy?**

*I don't think so. Any way, risk is not something that one preaches; it's*

something that's either there or not there. Societies in transition are well aware of that, as they can clearly see winners and losers. But the same is increasingly true in the older societies.

In your writings you have recommended to German society the British and American way of dealing with social conflict. Could some of your recommendations apply to Poland?

*I'm sure they could. In my Reflections on the Revolution in Europe I myself applied them to the post-Communist societies. But they have their own traditions. I believe that it is healthier, that societies flourish more, when they recognize that conflict is the reality of life. If they create institu-*

*tions through which conflict can be channeled. It is characteristic of Germany that people are always looking for total agreement, total consensus. That means that many conflicts are repressed, to use a psychoanalytical term, and may surprise people when they explode onto the scene. I'm a great believer in recognition and institutional channeling of conflicts. And that applies in Poland as it does in Germany and the UK.*

Some Poles may feel that constant conflict and a constant challenging of values is quite dangerous. Where then is the limit of conflict?

*When conflict turns against the very institutions through which it can be*

*expressed, we are in trouble! Everywhere there are signs that people don't particularly believe in democratic institutions. And I'm not talking about the new democracies – I'm talking about the old democracies. That's a point where it is important to say: "Hey, stop! What's happening here?", and to return to the defense of basic institutions, rather than continuing the conflict.*

Apart from your distinguished intellectual career, another theme in your life has been a calling in politics, first in the German parliament, then at the European Commission, and now in the House of Lords. From your personal perspective: are these two worlds related in any way?



Piotr Janowski/Agencja Gazeta

Miners demonstration in front of the Ministry of Economy, Labour and Social Policy of Poland, Warsaw 2003

*I'll give you an answer which may surprise you. They are not related, they are separate. And whereas it is possible in one's life to spend time in both of them, it is not possible to combine the two. Politics is never an applied science or scholarship, and scholarship can obviously use the material which is gathered through political experience, but it's another world. The key difference is time. In politics one is never master of one's time, decisions have to be taken when they have to be taken. In scholarship and science, time is in principle unlimited. In practice, this is not the case because the research money runs out or you have to produce something. But the essence of science is that you can determine the time yourself. These are two worlds which are not combinable, other than in a sequence of experience.*

**Education, research and science were your domains at the European Commission. From that perspective, how might you see the role of scientists from Poland and other new EU members?**

*Poland is different from the other new countries, because Poland has an almost unbroken tradition of scientific inquiry on a world standard, even in the social sciences. I say "even in the social sciences", because they were obviously particularly vulnerable in the Communist period. I don't think it will be difficult for Poland to be a part of the European and the international community of scholars and scientists; whereas in many of the other countries, notably Hungary, there were really few left when the liberation came, because in 1956 or before so many Hungarian scholars had left the country and were very influential in the rest of the world. So there are significant differences, but participation in the international community is not a Polish problem.*

**The last string in your bow is a career as an academic administrator – as a Direc-**

**tor of the London School of Economics and a Warden of St. Antony's College in Oxford. Would you have any practical recommendations for the academic bodies in Poland which are maybe searching for a *modus operandi* in the new reality? You said somewhere that you didn't want universities to become "yesterday's world preserved in aspic."**

*The point has come when the universities have to stop being afraid of the outside world. I understand fully that after 1989 regaining liberty meant, among other things, that one closed one's doors to outside influences, which were regarded essentially as something bad and harmful, and I do understand that, because in that period it was necessary. But that period is now over. One of the characteristics of the international academic world is that it is now wide open to economic and social forces of many kinds, and I think that the time has come in which universities in the post-Communist world no longer need to be afraid that when they open their doors to the world the enemy will come in. They can be confident that when they open their doors they will be able to come out and interact with other areas of society. So my advice would be: have courage in your convictions and a little more self-confidence, and open the doors to the outside world. By "outside world" I don't mean other countries, but other areas of society.*

**Are you a believer in wider participation in higher education, since, for example, the plan in the UK is to have 50% of the young population in the universities? Or do you think this has gone too far: universities need to remain centers of intellectual excellence?**

*That's not how I understand this conflict. I do think we have gone too far in the UK, but I believe that the 50% notion, i.e. 50% of each generation should get a higher degree, creates a single road to academic success.*

*I believe in having a multiplicity of institutions of different levels for people who want to go beyond normal schooling. I think it's a pity really that we have abolished the notion of polytechnic and made them all universities, thereby instilling in people the notion that there is only one way forward – the road of an academic degree. I think there should be a whole variety of institutions; people should be able to make choices at various points in their life, which could mean, in the end, that 30% go to university, but not many more. However, as a matter of principle I have always defended the view that education is a civil right, and that the people who have the talent and the will should be able to move to whatever level is appropriate for them.*

**Lord Dahrendorf, as a foreign member of the Polish Academy of Sciences, have you got any special links with Poland?**

*Yes. I have long had personal links with Poland, with Polish sociology. And since 1989 these have been intensified, especially in Warsaw, I have to say. These are close and friendly links, and they will continue to be that. I am very proud to have been elected a foreign member of the Polish Academy of Sciences.*

**Is the Polish way of looking at the social world any different, somehow unique, or is it placed within the global field of sociology?**

*I think it's very well placed within the global field of sociology. Its contribution is important because it's both empirical and theoretical, which is quite unusual in the former post-Communist countries. This has been characteristic of the entire post-war period – here I'm thinking of Professor Stanislaw Ossowski, and such people.*

**How is it possible for you, a man with such a diverse career and experience with so many cultures and countries, to build your identity?**



Arkadiusz Ścibicki/Agencja Gazeta

*As you may have seen, I published a little autobiographical book called *Crossing Frontiers*, which has appeared in Poland. I suppose my identity is that of a changing identity, it is one of "Crossing Frontiers". I haven't suffered from that particularly, on the contrary - I have quite enjoyed it.*

**And this need to cross boundaries, both intellectual and geographical, could it have any roots in your childhood? What**

**about the influence of your father's political career or your imprisonment in a Nazi camp while a young man?**

*This has had a very, very strong influence on my thinking about liberty. Liberty is the key concept for me. But, after all, my father did not emigrate; he never left his party - the Social Democratic Party. My crossing of frontiers must have come from somewhere else, and I don't quite know from where.*

### Lord Ralf Dahrendorf

German-British sociologist, liberal thinker and politician, born 1929 in Hamburg. From 1974 to 1984 Director of the London School of Economics, from 1987 to 1997 Warden of St. Antony's College at Oxford University.

Creator of the sociological theory of social conflict, which he presented in the book *Soziale Klassen und Klassenkonflikt in der Industriellen Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart 1957; first English edition entitled *Class and Conflict in Industrial Society*, Stanford 1959), and subsequently in the works *Out of Utopia: Toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis* (New York-London 1964), *Essays in the Theory of Society* (Stanford, Col. 1968) and *Toward a Theory of Social Conflict* (Chicago 1969). In 1988 he published *The Modern Social Conflict* and in 1990 *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*. His autobiography *Crossing Borders* was published in Poland in 2003.

His political career as a liberal was marked by such distinguished offices as Commissioner in the European Commission in Brussels where he was responsible for foreign trade and external relations, and later for research; Minister of State in the Foreign Office in Willy Brandt's first government. He is a Chairman of the Board of the Central and East European Publishing Project (since 1986).

In 1993 he was granted a life peerage by Queen Elizabeth II.

Interviewed by  
**Karolina Garztecka-Shapland**

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