

A German Over Britain

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'Dahrendorf on Britain'

by **Ralf Dahrendorf** (BBC Publications, £2.95), and the television series

Just after the New Year 1983, a series of television programmes was shown. These were accompanied by a book of the same title called Dahrendorf on Britain. Professor Ralf Dahrendorf is a German national and is the current Director of the London School of Economics. In the book and series he offers his observations of modern British society, attempts to discover the faults behind Britain's decline and also provides some ideas for ways of improvement.

Dahrendorf tells us that since the First World War, Britain has been a country in relative decline, compared with both the rest of the world and its own past rates of growth. Previously there had been a trade-off between social strengths and economic success. We had, since the Second World War, benefited in the former, until recently when a distinct decline in both has been marked. Evidence of the decline in social stability is seen in the return to rioting in the major cities:

"Britain is moving back from a civilised contract of good behaviour to the hard core of power and obedience which always was its foundation."

That Britain is moving towards a society of greater police dominance is undoubted, but to say that we are moving back to the hard core of power and obedience which always was its foundation is not true. Since the 1688 revolution, John Locke's contractual theory of government has prevailed, perhaps without people realising it. Good government is desirable and is supported by the people, but when governments introduce bad laws, the people will not abide by them, as was the case with Heath's industrial relations bill. This theory, rather than the

Hobbesian idea of absolute primacy of the state, has prevailed as the practice in Britain.

We are told that amid the gloom there remains some hope. The British schools and universities are world famous and it was in Britain that the first stored programme computer was invented. This excellence only exaggerates the lack of commercial success, and the fact that Britain must now import what it has itself invented.

Britain, Dahrendorf tells us, is a 'solidarity' society which both Heath and Thatcher have tried to change to one of individual competition, like the modern Germany. The concept of solidarity implies a reluctance to change and an industrial conservatism, as well as a degree of nationalism, which seem to be very true of Britain.

He continues to tell us that the British have an identity crisis, based upon the decline of the empire (with all its consequences) and the European debate. Undoubtedly the long-term effect of joining the EEC will be that some of the British insularity will be removed. Dahrendorf is right in saying that the British identity is essentially European, but having 'Twin Towns' and a drunken Scottish football fan in Germany saying how he loves his continental opponents hardly proves the point! This is perhaps rather more a defect of television than of Dahrendorf's ideas, as these examples are not mentioned in the book. He is quite critical of the European system, as he was when he was the head of one of the EEC Commissions. Britain, he says, should not have joined when it did, as it was not the 'right type' of Europe. But now that we are in, he argues, it is not worth pulling out, as British expenditure on the EEC is still relatively small.

Quite what is implied by the 'right type' is not expanded upon in the book, but it is plain to see that the EEC is becoming another tier of bureaucracy, rather than an organisation concerned principally with free trade. The EEC has an increased home market for goods and more labour mobility, both of which can only be beneficial. But for lasting effect the EEC must consider keeping the above benefits but phasing out its

bureaucratic layers.

We are told that the influx of a vast number of peoples into Britain in recent decades is aiding 'our' identity crisis. The book criticises the new race bill: if the British intend to retain some of their former nationalism they must make the newcomers also proud to be British; they too must be first class citizens. But what is paramount is that the British must lose much of their 'island mentality', and in support of this the case for free trade is given. There is no room for protectionism, which is impossible anyway.

Dahrendorf's idea that Britain has an island mentality is hardly justified by a few people being against a channel tunnel. Trade is the important area, and here Britain has led the world, and is still essentially a trading nation. One need only witness the number of other countries in which England is the native tongue to agree that Britain does not have an island mentality.

Realistically, the above criteria do not justify a 'crisis'. Britain is still one of the countries in the world with a patriotic population (aided no doubt by the monarchy) and this is not really considered in the book. The Falklands War was witness to Britain's patriotism as well. What is more, it seems strange that a German declares that Britain has an identity crisis. Germany, having been formed in 1870, and then having lost two World Wars, having been divided into two countries, and having its borders continually changed, is hardly full of people more sure of their own identity. (Many even prefer their old identities of being Bavarian or Prussian.)

A whole section of the book and one television programme are devoted to class, and it is here that the contrast between the book and the series is starkest, largely through the choice of examples. It is the middle class which provides Dahrendorf with the problems, probably because apart from the small number at either of the extremes so few people are willing to be categorised. The television programme gave a definition far too rigid to be of any use: first that exemplified by the capitalist farmer who has aspirations towards a modern

Germany (a concept far too often used in this series); secondly a thinking socialist teacher. The book, which obviously provides more of Dahrendorf's actual views, does not make such a clear distinction. It leaves the analogy of a 'layer cake', and mentions a far wider range of people, almost leading one to one's own conclusion that our society is not one of class, but that class is an idea invented to bring small groups of individuals into blocks for statistical analysis. This, I feel, is not what is intended.

We are further told that the only way in which class could matter is in the 'work ethic'. The British have a unique approach to work - it is something to be enjoyed. We are told that the British live to work, rather than work to live. This leads to a lack of dynamism; a works department at a local council is given as an example! A distinction is made between work and activity. Employment, he argues, should be provided of the kind that people enjoy doing. But this seems to ignore any idea of production for the consumer - a far more important goal. Dahrendorf then seems surprised when he writes:

"The notion of a firm providing employment and producing output but not making profit for many years while it gradually finds its niche in the market is not very widespread in Britain."

Why should anyone run a firm if they do not intend to make a profit! The atmosphere of the book is epitomised by this sentence. Such a philosophy can only be achieved by state finance and support, but at no point does Dahrendorf admit to being in favour of state responsibilities; neither does he deny the need for state intervention, so his actual position is always in doubt.

Our parliamentary system of course occupies much of the time he spends on institutions. As is fashionable nowadays, our adversarial system is criticised for not providing continuity or what the electorate want. People do not want extremes, we are told, but if we look at past governments, we see extremes are not what they get. (Perhaps the issue of disarmament will prove otherwise.)

Whether we have an adversarial or a consensual system in parliament makes little difference - in fact parliament itself probably makes little difference to most people's lives - but if either system is to be preferred, it is the adversarial for it inspires stronger debate, as it is based upon argument rather than agreement.

Compromises, which are inspired by the other methods of parliament, are rarely preferable.

Dahrendorf tells us that decentralisation is probably a good thing, but it would be difficult to execute in Britain as twenty-five per cent of the population live within twenty-five miles of Trafalgar Square.

There is no way that the German system, which Dahrendorf continually uses as a comparison, could be reproduced in Britain and it is not desirable either. Germany developed as a number of "Lander" which were not united until 1870. Each "Land" had its own centre, and as such there is no one dominating town, like London. Munich is the cultural centre, Frankfurt the banking centre, and Hamburg that for trade. In Britain London is naturally the focus for all these and more. Forced decentralisation only leads to inefficiencies, as enterprises and firms are driven from the areas which naturally provide them with the best advantages. If these areas become overcrowded, firms will move to others, as it is then more profitable to operate from elsewhere. There is no case for planned decentralisation, and that, for example, the motor licensing centre is in Swansea is of no benefit to society as a whole - far from it.

Finally, Dahrendorf offers some advice on improvements that could be made. This idea of co-operation between government, unions and employers is by no means new, and as there should be co-operation on an internal scale, so should there be co-operation on an international level. A Bill of Rights is considered and Dahrendorf decides that something along these lines would be desirable. Quite what such a Bill would assert is not discussed, but one doubts after seeing the effects of the sex and race discrimination acts that such a Rights Bill would do anything but cause frustration and

greater inequality. The doctrine of 'self-help' is praised and admired throughout the book, but any example that Dahrendorf provides in support seems to have some state backing, rather negating his arguments. Perhaps his true position is brought out when he mentions 'live and let live'. This doctrine, he says, may be one of increasing liberty but it is not one of increasing prosperity. So do we deduce that increased coercion and state compulsion are the road to greater economic heights? Again, Dahrendorf does not make his position clear. The only real route to increased prosperity is through the competition of increased liberty, as was shown by the industrial revolution, where people were not centrally channelled and not centrally organised.

The whole air of the book is one of *implying* statism rather than actually presenting *arguments* in favour of such a system. It is all very well trying to increase liberty and being in favour of self-help, but in accordance government must, surely, also shrink, both in size and in the amount of money it absorbs. Dahrendorf does not commit himself either way; perhaps we are expected to assume an SDP/Liberal mixed policy bag. Dahrendorf does make it quite clear though that he is in favour of the black market. 'It must not be stopped', he says. 'Why not legalise it then?', one must reply.

Not only do the television series and the book provide an outside opinion of British society, but also they show how difficult a medium television is for communicating ideas and views. The difficulty seems to lie in the choice of examples, as there is pressure not to waste the visual opportunities of television. Examples tended to be simplistic, and rarely suited to a serious discussion. This was fear of losing the audience. Professor Dahrendorf himself admitted in the LSE Union's newspaper how he disliked television for the presentation of ideas.

When Dahrendorf was selected to be the director of the LSE he was a little surprised - for he admitted that economics was a mystery to him. Upon leaving, after a ten year reign, it is clear that he will have done nothing that might sully this innocence.

Free Life