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**Economic Opportunity, Civil Society
and Political Liberty**

Ralf Dahrendorf

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◆ Preface

During the final days of the World Summit for Social Development (11 and 12 March 1995), UNRISD held an international conference in Copenhagen which explored the theme of **Rethinking Social Development**. Ten distinguished social scientists and writers spoke at the event: Ralf Dahrendorf, Amitai Etzioni, Johan Galtung, Anthony Giddens, Eric Hobsbawm, Fatema Mernissi, Tetsuo Najita, Emma Rothschild, Wole Soyinka and Tatyana Tolstaya.

Their presentations will be published commercially in various forms. To facilitate early discussion of issues raised at the gathering, however, UNRISD will include several of the conference lectures in its **Discussion Paper** series.

The following paper, by Ralf Dahrendorf, takes as its theme the dilemmas associated with “squaring the circle” of wealth creation, social cohesion and political freedom in the OECD countries. As the metaphor of square and circle implies, these three essential goals of development are not necessarily compatible and may even conflict with each other — particularly within the context of advancing globalization characteristic of the present day.

Globalization creates what Dahrendorf calls “perverse choices”: to become and remain competitive in international markets requires the kind of flexible use of resources which threatens social cohesion and political freedom in a number of ways. The expansion of the global market has, for example, been associated with the creation of new forms of inequality and social exclusion. “Inequality”, Dahrendorf notes, “can be a source of hope and progress in an environment which is sufficiently open to enable people to ...improve their life chances by their own efforts. The new inequality, however, is of a different kind; it would be better described as inequalization..., building paths to the top for some and digging holes for others, creating cleavages, splitting”.

The advanced industrial countries are faced not only with the prospect of long-term unemployment for 5-10 per cent of the population of working age, but also with the growth of an underclass of the truly disadvantaged, who are excluded in both economic and social terms. They are, in fact, unnecessary: “The rich can get richer without them; governments can even get re-elected without their votes; and GNP can rise and rise and rise.”

In this context, social conflict is less likely to take the form of collective efforts to improve the lot of the disadvantaged than to be manifested in “individualized conflict” which heightens personal insecurity and produces a growing sense of anomie. Such a situation threatens the very basis of a civil society, which rests upon the free association of people to pursue their interests. Civil society is made up of citizens; but the polarizing effects of global markets can bring the concept of citizenship under heavy attack.

Growing insecurity gives rise to authoritarian temptations. In the fourth section of his essay, Professor Dahrendorf explores the possibility that growing numbers of people in the OECD countries might be inclined to ensure the two goals of social cohesion and economic competitiveness through partially sacrificing the third goal of political freedom. The

authoritarian model of governance in many economically successful Asian countries is frequently commented upon with favour in Western societies threatened by economic instability and crime.

The paper concludes with six “modest proposals” for improving the likelihood that a workable balance can be maintained between wealth creation, social cohesion and political freedom in advanced industrial societies. The first of these proposals is “to change the language of public economics”, rejecting the simplistic tenets of “an economism run amok”. Others include recognizing the changing nature of work in contemporary Northern societies, delinking basic entitlements from particular jobs but ensuring that all young people have some experience in the job market; taking immediate measures to prevent the formation of “tomorrow’s underclass”; reinforcing the power of local communities; recognizing the role to be played by “stakeholders” — not just “shareholders” — in business decisions; and defining an acceptable role for government in the provision of public services.

In the last analysis, squaring the circle of economic, social and political well-being in an increasingly interconnected world is a project which cannot be limited to any single region or country: “the very values of an enlightened and civilized society demand that privilege be replaced by generalized entitlements — if not ultimately by world citizenship then by citizenship rights for all human beings in the world”. This conclusion, which was also reached by UNRISD in its report for the Social Summit (**States of Disarray: The Social Effects of Globalization**), merits a great deal of reflection. It will be systematically addressed in the future work of the Institute.

Lord Dahrendorf is Warden of St. Antony’s College, Oxford and a Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford. The work on **Rethinking Social Development** has been directed at UNRISD by Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara.

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Dharam Ghai
Director

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PART I: IN DEFENCE OF THE FIRST WORLD

At its best, the First World was not a bad place in which to live and to thrive. Did anyone ever call it the First World? Or was the numeral merely the backdrop for the unmentionable Second World of communist oppression which has now all but disappeared, and the Third (later also the Fourth) World of destitution, disease and despondency? Whatever the motive, let us not dismiss the First World too easily. At its best, it combined three social virtues:

- economies which not only offered a decent life to many but which were set to grow and to open up opportunities to those not yet prosperous;
- societies which had taken the step from status to contract, from unquestioned dependence to questioning individualism, without destroying the communities in which people lived;
- politics which combined respect for the rule of law with those chances of political participation, of dismissing as well as choosing governments, which we have come to call democracy.

One may well ask when and where such wealthy, civilized and enlightened countries existed. The temptation is considerable to hide behind acronyms and refer to what is often called the OECD world nowadays, the membership of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. But let me resist the temptation and name names. The United States of America in the period from Roosevelt to Kennedy, if not to quite the same extent before and after, is one example. Tens of millions of people from all over the world dreamed of living in America, and millions went to great lengths to get there. Magnets for immigration are not the worst index of social well-being. This applies to other countries as well. The United Kingdom has long had a more even balance of migration — except for the Irish, for persecuted Jews and later for people from the poorer colonies — than the United States; but for long periods of this century it certainly belonged in the First World as here defined. So did parts of the former British Empire, the “temperate Commonwealth” as some call it in geographically correct if politically incorrect language — Australia and New Zealand, Canada and a few other bits and pieces around the world. Then there are smaller European countries to mention: Switzerland; Sweden and also the other Scandinavian states. By the 1950s, when the Organization for European Economic Co-operation (which meant, above all, reconstruction) was turned into the OECD, most of Western Europe had become a part of the “happy few”.

Their characteristics were, to repeat, economic opportunity, civil society and political liberty. However, it would be testing the benevolence of the reader beyond the permissible to leave such smug statements without qualification. In fact, three major qualifications have to be added before a serious discourse becomes possible. Each of these qualifications would warrant an essay of its own.

First of all, the perfection of the First World in its heyday was flawed. All of its members excluded some from the benefits of their achievements, and even from opportunities. The history of the United States is one long sequence of battles for inclusion — from the Civil War to the Civil Rights campaigns and beyond, to today’s underclass. For the most part, the battle could be fought within the institutions of the country, which is worth noting. Moreover, it was fought not just by the excluded themselves; they had allies, in the Supreme Court for example, which is also worth noting. But American society was never even nearly perfect in terms of economic opportunity, social inclusion, or political participation. To the present day (to mention just one of too many shocking facts) the American president is probably elected by no more than 15 per cent or so of those who, by law, should be entitled to vote.

The American imperfections are stark and visible, but those of the United Kingdom or Australia, Switzerland or Sweden are no less important. Economic inequality meant for many that the promise of citizenship remained unreal. The social conflicts which would presumably have dominated a world summit on social development a hundred years ago were fierce; government representatives at an 1895 summit would for the most part have recommended the suppression of the conference by force. It took decades of internal struggles — class struggles as they were correctly called at the time — to assert the basic equality of all human beings in society. It also took two modern wars because, horrible though it is to say this, there is no greater social equalizer than a modern war in which entire populations get involved. It was not an accident that the Second World War was called a “total war”.

These wars, to be sure, were not fought by the great democracies among themselves. They set civilized and not (not yet?) quite civilized countries against each other, those which had made it in terms of turning opportunities into general entitlements, and those which had not quite made it. I stress this point advisedly, and will even add a general thesis: the greatest risk to peace emanates from countries on the way from the old cycle of poverty, dependence and illiberty to the life chances here described as those of the First World. When opportunities are held out for people but are not yet there to grasp, when economic development accelerates but social and political development lags behind, a mixture of frustration and irresponsibility develops which breeds violence. Such violence can be individual and undirected, but it can also become collective and directed against apparently

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