

Seminar on Life chances in Europe, Stockholm, October 29-30, 2008

Memo on background, issues and objectives

By Lennart Arvedson, Ph.D (Stanford)

From time to time the expression “life chances” is used to denote efforts to enhance individual liberty in society. More seldom is the expression defined and delineated in a more specific way. When the concept was developed by Ralf Dahrendorf it was in the context of the fundamental question of the possibility of progress.¹ There are some who see progress as inevitable, but there is no basis for such an assumption, according to Dahrendorf.² He argues, nonetheless, that progress is *possible*, that the progress of man’s potential is *real* and that some progress of human life chances is *probable*. He also states that “human societies gain their quality by their ability to offer people more life chances”.³ Life chances, as Dahrendorf defines them are “opportunities for individual growth, for the realization of talents, wishes and hopes, and these opportunities are provided by social conditions”. Life chances thus described may seem “somewhat flowery”, says Dahrendorf and moves into a more rigorous discussion. Life chances are not simply opportunities in the sense of alternatives to choose from; they are a function of two elements, *options* and *ligatures* (bonds, allegiances, linkages). This is not the place to delve into a deeper analysis of the meaning of these ideas, suffice it for the moment to quote Dahrendorf’s provocative proposition that “ligatures without options are oppressive, whereas options without bonds are meaningless”⁴. Dahrendorf developed his life chance theory in later books, especially in Dahrendorf (1988) which was recently revised in Dahrendorf (2007).

We suggest that in order to understand the extent to which life in a society is characterized by the existence of life chances it is important to identify indicators of change and mobility in the lives of individuals. This is in addition to the prevalent mode of describing the quality of life in a society by comparing the socioeconomic conditions for particular groups or segments of the population at different points in time. The life chance perspective focuses on the dynamics and changes in the lives of individuals. Indicators such as *income mobility*, *social mobility* and *professional mobility* are important – again as evidenced on the level of the individual. Two specific examples: The frequently problematic socioeconomic conditions of single mothers is often described; but interestingly there are few if any current data on the *duration* of that condition (at least in Sweden). Or take unemployment which is, of course, a social problem in any society, but, again, an understanding of its temporal dimension is in order to evaluate its consequences for people. Two Swedish sociologists develop this thought as follows:

“If, for example, all young people experienced a short spell of unemployment and thereafter enjoyed life-long job security, unemployment would not be a great social problem; and even if the probabilities of experiencing such spells were higher for some groups than for others, unemployment would not be noteworthy for creating inequality.”⁵

¹ Dahrendorf, Ralf. Life Chances. Approaches to Social and Political Theory. London 1979.

² Op cit p. 14.

³ Op cit p. 13.

⁴ Op cit p.. 31

⁵ Jonsson, Jan O och Colin Mills, red. Cradle to Grave. Life-course change in modern Sweden. Sociology, Durham 2001 p. xviii

The workshop has the following objectives:

- Provide an overview of the extent to which the concept of *life chances* is in current use in the political discourse in the countries represented in ELF.
- Introduce and/or enhance the use of the concept of life chances into the discourse in European liberal thinking.
- Identify efforts to define and give concrete meaning to the concept of life chances.
- Identify and develop indicators of life chances in European societies.
- Identify and develop thoughts about policy ramifications.

References

Dahrendorf, Ralf. *Life Chances. Approaches to Social and Political Theory*. London 1979.
 Dahrendorf, Ralf, *The modern social conflict. An essay on the politics of liberty*. London 1988
 Dahrendorf, Ralf, *The modern social conflict*. Second revised edition. Somerset, NJ 2007

There is an extensive literature on social mobility in various European countries. Examples are

Breen, Richard (ed). *Social Mobility in Europe*. Oxford University Press 2004
 The fifteen chapters in the volume provide an overview of social mobility in Europe during the last three decades of the 20th century and separate studies of Germany, France, Italy, Ireland, Great Britain, Sweden, Norway, Poland, Hungary, Israel and The Netherlands.

Blanden, Jo, Paul Gregg and Stephen Machin *Intergenerational Mobility in Europe and North America*. Centre for Economic Performance 2005.⁶

Jonsson, Jan O and Colin Mills (editors) *Cradle to Grave. Life-course change in Modern Sweden*. Sociologypress 2001.

The Economist has on a number of occasions in recent years commented on issues of mobility in the US and in Europe⁷. *The New York Times* discussed the topic in a series of articles in 2005. The articles were published in the paperback volume *Class Matters*. The New York Times 2005.

Workshop format

⁶ <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/about/news/IntergenerationalMobility.pdf>

⁷ For example: Snakes and ladders.

http://economist.com/people/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_GJSNQRG

The workshop takes place in conjunction with the ELDR congress in Stockholm. Participants will be academics and other persons interested in the problem area. Proposals are invited from the ELF member think tanks. The number of participants will be maximum 40.

An introduction will be provided by Lennart Arvedson, PhD, who was the co-editor with professor Ingemund Hägg of the only book published in Swedish specifically devoted to the analysis of life chances. Arvedson was chairman of The Bertil Ohlin Institute 1999 – 2004.