

Ralf Dahrendorf

an intellectual genealogy

Academic genealogy, the practice of tracing your intellectual ancestry through your PhD supervisor or academic mentor, is a fast growing – if eccentric – field. Here, as a tribute to former director Lord Dahrendorf, who died earlier this year, **Jon Adams** places Dahrendorf’s work in an academic family tree dating back to 1635.

Former LSE director Ralf Dahrendorf died on 17 June 2009. Although he had been a student in Hamburg, a politician in Bonn and Brussels, and would later take a post as warden of St Antony’s College, Oxford, Dahrendorf called himself a Londoner, and it was to LSE that he would remain most closely associated. When he was made a life peer in 1993, he chose a title that cemented his connection to the School: Baron Dahrendorf of Clare Market.

Dahrendorf had been LSE director between 1974 and 1984, a tumultuous time in the School’s history during which academic achievements were largely eclipsed by budget cuts and student protests, but he had first come to LSE as a Leverhulme research scholar in 1952, where he met his first wife and the mother of his three children.

There is another sense in which Dahrendorf’s ‘family tree’ intersects with LSE. His intellectual lineage, too, grows out of and feeds into the history of the institution.

Recent years have seen a growing interest in tracing one’s ‘academic genealogy’. This isn’t the same as an intellectual history, which seeks to trace the influence one thinker has on another, but settles instead for a simple mentor-mentee relation: your ‘father’ is your dissertation supervisor, your ‘grandfather’ is your supervisor’s supervisor, and so on.

It’s a task made easier by the provision of internet databases that allow academic genealogists to trace far enough back through the thicket of modern scholarship to wed themselves to one of the main branches tapering into the very origins of their discipline.

Especially popular with mathematicians, who have usefully compiled the vast Mathematics Genealogy Project (collecting more than 135,000 names), the practice now stretches to all academic fields. In the case of Lord Dahrendorf, it allows for speculation on the web of academic influence starting at LSE (see tree illustration), where **Karl Popper** was his supervisor.

Academic lineages are not always direct. Dahrendorf, for example, undertook two doctoral theses (his first in Hamburg), while Popper had two su-

pervisors: **Moritz Schlick** (1882-1936), founder of the Vienna Circle, and the German linguist **Karl Bühler** (1879-1963). Schlick’s significance is largely measured by what Popper did not become: Popper’s ‘falsification’ would emerge in reaction to everything he thought Schlick and the logical positivists were doing wrong.

But it is Bühler, Popper’s supervisor in psychology, who is usually regarded as a stronger influence, and his lineage that we will follow. Bühler’s teacher had been **Oswald Külpe** (1862-1915), a structural psychologist whose other students included the Marxist philosopher **Ernst Bloch** (1855-1977). Bloch’s thinking, in particular, would come to influence **Theodor Adorno** (1903-69), with whom Dahrendorf would briefly work during 1954, and of whom he would later become a noted critic. Adorno wrote to a colleague at the time that he thought Dahrendorf ‘a very talented man’, adding: ‘when it comes down to it, he hates everything we stand for.’

Külpe, in turn, had been mentored by **Wilhelm Wundt** (1832-1920) – an enormously influential psychologist who counted the Americans **James McKeen Cattell** (1860-1944) and **Granville Stanley Hall** (1844-1924) among his students, along with UCL professor **Charles Spearman** (1853-1945). Known for his work on statistics and psychology, it was Spearman who would introduce the theory of ‘g’ – the unit of general intelligence that has since proved so controversial in IQ testing.

As one of the founders of the discipline, there are no psychologist ancestors to Wundt. Instead,

Wundt’s teachers included **Johannes Peter Müller** (1801-58) – a German physiologist and comparative anatomist. Müller’s students, in turn – very distant relatives of Dahrendorf – included **Hermann von Helmholtz** (1821-94) and **Ernst Haeckel** (1834-1919). Helmholtz worked on everything from visual perception to electromagnetism, and proved an influential philosopher of science. **Albert Michelson** (1852-1931) was one of Helmholtz’s students, who, with Edward Morely, would falsify the ether theory of light in the Michelson-Morely experiment. Along with Helmholtz, Michelson has the honour of having a moon crater named after him.

Receiving his doctorate in Bonn in 1822, Müller had been assistant to **Karl Rudolphi** (1771-1832), a Swedish naturalist who settled in Germany where he studied the life cycle of nematodes and (somewhat less constructively) argued that human races ought to be considered separate species. Rudolphi’s supervisor had been **Christian Ehrenfried Weigel** (1748-1831), a German botanist who studied ferns. Only four years his senior, Weigel’s supervisor was the luxuriantly named **Johann Christian Polycarp Erxleben** (1744-77), founder of the oldest veterinary school in Germany and son of Germany’s first female doctor. Erxleben’s doctorate was supervised by **Abraham Gotthelf Kästner** (1719-1800), an encyclopaedist and mathematician who – like Michelson and Helmholtz – also has a moon crater named for him.

Around 1700, the genealogical path straightens and clears: we have now entered the Germanic branch of the mathematician’s family tree – here is **Christian August Hausen** (1693-1743), doctoral adviser to Kästner and early theorist of electricity. Hausen’s doctorate had been supervised by **Johann Christoph Wichmannshausen** (1663-1727).

At this distance, there is little in the universities that is recognisably ‘scientific’, and certainly nothing like the distinctive and ‘falsifiable’ body of work that Popper’s philosophy of science would recognise and to an extent come to define. Wichmannshausen was a philologist

specialising in the near-Eastern languages. At this distance the familiar institutional boundaries between disciplines just don’t exist.

Once joined with the main line of the Mathematics Genealogy Project, information about who supervised whom is easily obtained: Wichmannshausen has **Otto Mencke** (1644-1707), whose adviser was **Jakob Thomasius** (1622-84), whose adviser was **Valentin Alberti** (1635-97), and here, in 17th century Leipzig, finally, abruptly, our trail runs cold.

Looking at Dahrendorf’s ‘ancestors’, it becomes clear that any ‘inherited’ influence is slight. Karl Rudolphi and Karl Popper have little in common, save being extraordinarily clever men, fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to nurture that intelligence.

They end up on the same branch not because a torch of brilliance is being passed from generation to generation, but because the majority of the best minds will – in a relatively efficient system – end up being concentrated in only a few centres of learning – including, since the early 1900s, LSE.

It’s likely that Dahrendorf would neither have known nor much cared that his lineage extended back to Alberti. Certainly, we can be confident that Popper himself would not have been impressed. Reflecting later in life on his formative influences, Popper claimed: ‘I believe I learned more about the theory of knowledge from my dear omniscient master Adalbert Pösch than from any other of my teachers.’

Adalbert Pösch? Pösch was a cabinetmaker in Vienna, to whom Popper was apprenticed for two years. This influence, at least, left a tangible residue: when he moved to New Zealand in 1937, Popper was able to build his own furniture. ■



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