

# Albert Einstein: Radical pacifist and democrat

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**I draw attention here to the radical political grounding of Einstein's pacifism. I also describe some less commonly known aspects of his commitment to civil liberties, particularly in the context of the anti-left hysteria and anti-racism current in the United States of the late 1940s and 50s. I also examine briefly his views on socialism.**

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FOR Einstein himself, his scientific work was always to be at the core of his being, the very definition of his persona. Nowhere is this clearer than in the substance and style of his Autobiographical Notes that he wrote for the volume *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist* edited by P. A. Schlipp<sup>1</sup>. The note, which Einstein begins by describing it as an 'my own obituary', has no reference even to the bare facts of his life, apart from brief comments on his education and the intellectual influences of his childhood and youth. It is entirely devoted to a short account of his main work and the philosophical and scientific questions that led up to them. He interrupts a critique of Newtonian physics in the note to remark: "Is this supposed to be an obituary?" the astonished reader will likely ask. I would like to reply: essentially yes. For the essential in the being of a man of my type lies precisely in what he thinks and how he thinks, not in what he does or suffers'.

In this account there is not even the briefest mention of his views on any subject other than the scientific questions that occupied him throughout his scientific career. But this stance, that virtually dismisses his social and political views, belies Einstein's considerable and not inconsequential engagement with many of the major social and political issues of his day. Einstein's broad involvement in public affairs was undoubtedly part of the reason for the iconic status that he was to attain. While it was Einstein's science that propelled him to international fame, Einstein remained in the public eye not in the least due to his regular and willing intervention in public affairs.

Einstein's life spanned some of the most tumultuous years of a turbulent century. His *Annus mirabilis* was a decade before the First World War. By the time he died, two World Wars had run their tragic course, the first atomic bombs had been tested, and global politics was dominated by the Cold War that split the world into two camps, armed to their teeth with nuclear weapons, that

confronted each other across the globe. The years between the two World Wars was very much the era of the socialist revolution even if most of them were short-lived attempts with the sole exception of the Russian revolution that gave rise to the Soviet Union. Fascism rose to power and was defeated in the course of the Second World War, but not before perpetrating the Holocaust and extracting a grim toll of human lives, particularly in Eastern Europe. The socialist wave continued in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, even if its appeal was far more dominant in the Third World. A wave of national independence movements in the first half of the century ended the old style of colonial rule that had held sway over a significant section of the world's population even though colonial powers did not cede their powers before sowing the seeds of conflicts in areas such as the Middle East that continue to take their toll even today.

In his reactions to these developments and the political and social issues that they raised, Einstein did not articulate at length an unified political and social philosophy, unlike some of his contemporaries such as the British biologist J. D. Bernal. But from the considerable body of his comments, observations, letters and interventions in such matters that is available some enduring themes are clearly visible. These themes indeed are not mutually contradictory and one can certainly discern a certain coherence in Einstein's social and political views.

The hallmark of Einstein's political vision was his deep and abiding commitment to the cause of peace. Einstein's contribution to the promotion of nuclear disarmament in the post-Second World War period is perhaps more generally known. But without examining the record of Einstein's pacifism in the context of the First World War, one would miss the radical mould in which his pacifism was cast.

If the Second World War had a clear moral justification, there was little such moral underpinning for the one preceding it. The Great War, as it was known in its time, was accompanied by an extreme outpouring of nationalist chauvinism in all the countries participating in the war. The high human cost of the war, marked by long drawn out positional warfare that resulted in huge casualties without any substantial military gain and the introduction of chemical warfare in the form of poison gas, bred in turn a growing radical opposition to the conflict. Opposition to the war and the espousal of pacifism implied a political position that, in part at least, was associated with the radical Left in the politics of that era. The most radical

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opposition was in Russia, where withdrawal from the war and the signing of peace with Germany was one of the slogans of the radical movement for the overthrow of the Tsar.

Einstein's pacifism first found public expression in this context<sup>2</sup>, where those opposing the war, on both sides of the conflict, risked being labeled traitors and attracting the punitive attention of the state. Despite the risk, in October 1914, Einstein joined a small group of academics in the University of Berlin in signing a manifesto calling for European unity. The manifesto itself was a counter to another, issued by an array of German intellectuals, including many of Germany's leading scientists (and Einstein's colleagues and friends) that defended Germany's conduct of the war in the face of allegations of atrocities by the Allies.

In November 1914, Einstein joined the New Fatherland League, an organization to promote peace and European unity, as a founding member and began to participate in its activities. The organization was subsequently banned by the German government in early 1916. It of course attracted the attention of the police and Einstein's name appeared on the list of pacifists that they were to keep a watch on. Remarkably, as Einstein's pre-eminent scientific biographer, Abraham Pais, notes, this was also the period when Einstein was at the height of his scientific prowess, completing his formulation of general relativity, and publishing no less than fifty papers during the war years.

Einstein's political vision, as expressed in this early political activism, continued to be further sharpened in the period between the two World Wars. By the early 1930s he had moved to a critical view of the nationalist state, identifying the maintenance of national armies as playing a key role in promoting militarism. In a Gandhian vein, he emphasized the importance of individual moral commitment as a political act in the resistance to war, urging individual refusal to participate in military service, including compulsory military service in peace-time<sup>3</sup>. Einstein's perception of nationalism as providing the ideological justification for militarism and thus encouraging the preparedness for war, was to find later expression in his calls for a world government to halt the spread of nuclear weapons.

Nothing expresses more forcefully the radical, indeed revolutionary, cast of Einstein's pacifism than the following words from a 1931 article: 'There are two ways of resisting war – the legal way and the revolutionary way. The legal way involves the offer of alternative service, not as a privilege for a few, but as a right for all. The *revolutionary view involves uncompromising resistance, with a view to breaking the power of militarism in time of peace or the resources of the state in time of war...* both tendencies are valuable.... certain circumstances justify the one and certain circumstances the other'. (emphasis added)<sup>4</sup>.

Einstein certainly did not suffer from the weakness of converting his own beliefs and opinions into dogma. In the face of Nazism, he recognized the need to resist it by force of arms if necessary. With the accession of Hitler to power in Germany, he recognized the need of other Euro-

pean nations to arm themselves to resist fascism. If in his earlier emphasis on the importance of individual commitment to refusing military service he had echoed Gandhian views, he made a sharp departure from it now with his view that conscientious objection was an inappropriate policy in the face of the fascist threat.

Einstein returned to his pacifism after the war. Deeply unhappy at the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (he was to say later that Roosevelt would not have permitted it if he had been alive<sup>5</sup>), Einstein returned more insistently than ever before to the theme of ensuring peace in the future by handing over the control of nuclear weapons to a supranational government or organization. Einstein initially hopefully urged the government of the United States in this direction, appealing for co-operation with the Soviet Union, and was even willing to countenance the manufacture of nuclear weapons by the US in the interim period. But he was soon disappointed and turned sharply critical of United States policy. Despite his criticism of the Soviet opposition to his proposals, he nevertheless acknowledged the failure of the United States to deliver any credible assurance to the Soviet Union regarding its security that would have encouraged the latter to co-operate in the search for some means of supranational control of nuclear weapons. He was particularly critical of the unwillingness of the United States to guarantee the 'no first use' (as it would be known in current nuclearspeak) of nuclear weapons.

By 1952, Einstein had returned once again to an absolute pacifism, more absolute perhaps than his position in the inter-war years<sup>6</sup>. He argued for the radical abolition of all wars and the threat of wars by agreement between nations as the only solution to the problem of peace rather than trying to limit the means by which wars were waged. 'One has to be resolved', he wrote 'not to let himself be forced into actions that run counter to this goal'. As for the means of achieving this goal, he turned once again to the example of Gandhi's leadership of the Indian freedom struggle, citing it as an example of 'how a will governed by firm conviction is stronger than a seemingly invincible material power'.

We may note here that Einstein certainly considered that scientists and technologists had a particular moral responsibility, especially in the era of nuclear weapons. Einstein himself was at the forefront in mobilizing his scientific colleagues on questions of peace and disarmament. But it is also evident that his own pacifism was rooted in a political and moral standpoint that went much deeper than the question of the social responsibility of scientists and technologists alone.

In the light of Einstein's radical pacifism it is unsurprising that Einstein, as the years went by, was an increasingly powerful voice in defending the rights of individuals and groups against the power of the state. Einstein was not in the least hesitant to use his considerable prestige and influence to speak up on behalf of those whom he saw as

standing up to the tyranny of the state. One of the first such interventions by Einstein was his appeal on behalf of Friedrich Adler, a notable radical socialist leader in his day and a fellow-student and friend from Zurich. In 1916 Adler assassinated the Minister-President of Austria, notorious for his authoritarian rule. Einstein readily offered to intervene on his behalf<sup>7</sup> and publicly defended his friend<sup>8</sup>.

Einstein's readiness to defend the right to the freedom of thought and expression was to find full expression in his defence of those who were the targets of the anti-Communist witch-hunting in the United States of the McCarthy era. Einstein's defence of the American Left in a period of sustained attack on their rights is one of the many examples from this period. Einstein did not hesitate to be publicly associated with known American communists such as the singer Paul Robeson and the historian and civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois<sup>9</sup>. Einstein turned again to Gandhi and advocated 'revolutionary non-cooperation in the sense of Gandhi's'<sup>10</sup> as the only option for the intellectuals who were sought to be intimidated by being hauled up before US Congressional committees. If intellectuals were not prepared to resist this intimidation, 'then the intellectuals of this country deserve nothing better than the slavery that is intended for them'.

Einstein also devoted considerable attention to the question of racism<sup>9,11</sup>. In 1946, a year marked by racist incidents including several lynchings involving returning black American soldiers, he despatched a letter to President Truman, asking for the passage of an anti-lynching law. Einstein's home in the United States, Princeton, was itself steeped in racism. As late as 1942, Princeton University refused to admit black students as white Southern students would find it offensive. In this atmosphere, Einstein made his own anti-discrimination stance amply clear. When in 1937, a noted black opera singer could not find accommodation in Princeton town, Einstein invited her home to stay with him, thus beginning a friendship that was to continue to the end of Einstein's life.

As he had demonstrated continually from the days of the First World War, Einstein never lacked in personal courage when it came to speaking up for freedom. If on the one hand his own enormous prestige gave him ample protection, Einstein on the other hand went farther than most of his eminent contemporaries in speaking up against any form of authoritarianism. Einstein's prestige was unable to protect him only when it came to Nazism, leading to Einstein's early departure from Germany before the Nazis seized power. In the United States, Einstein was often the subject of Right-wing attacks in the United States and the target of editorial criticism even in newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* in the McCarthy era. As is publicly known today, the Federal Bureau of Investigation of the United States Government, under its notorious head, J. Edgar Hoover, continually spied on him throughout his entire life in the United States<sup>12</sup>. It is unclear whether Einstein was aware of the FBI's sur-

veillance, but it undoubtedly had little effect on him or his political activism.

Einstein's courage in defending the right to the freedom of expression is all the more remarkable for the great lack of it that characterized academic life, particularly in the sciences, in the United States even in the post-McCarthy era. In Einstein's own discipline of physics, the leading figures of the next generation were noteworthy for their political conformism and readiness to collaborate with US militarism. Even after the upheavals of 1968, it was not until the disastrous end of the Vietnam war that attitudes began to change. Only in the era of the Star Wars programme, after the great anti-nuclear protests of the 1970s, did opposition to nuclear militarism become respectable again in mainstream physics circles in the United States.

Einstein's radical pacifism extended also to a close interest in socialist political thought. The Zurich of Einstein's student days was home to an array of socialist leaders and thinkers, many of them exiles from their homeland. Socialism was very much in the air as an ideology and Einstein must not have been unaware of the different currents of political thought swirling around him. His friendship with Friedrich Adler, referred to earlier, would have certainly occasioned some exposure to socialist thought, since Friedrich, apart from being an active socialist himself, was the son of one of the leading Austrian social-democrats of his day, Victor Adler<sup>13</sup>.

Einstein was certainly sympathetic to the socialist experiment in the Soviet Union. For almost a decade he was part of the central committee of a German organization to promote public knowledge about developments in the Soviet Union, the 'Society of German friends of the new Russia'<sup>14</sup>. Though Einstein appears to have never taken the Soviet state to task publicly in strong terms on the question of freedom of speech and expression, it is likely that he would have been critical of the Soviet state on that score. But nevertheless he was clearly attracted to the economic aspects of socialist thought. The most detailed account of Einstein's views on socialism comes from the little essay titled 'Why Socialism' that he wrote for the inaugural number of the American Marxist journal *Monthly Review* in 1949 (refs 15, 16).

Einstein's presence as an eminent contributor in that inaugural issue is itself an interesting illustration of the close contact that Einstein maintained with left-wing political circles<sup>9</sup>. The journal was founded by Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy, who had both participated in the US presidential campaign of the Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace in 1948. The party, formed from the left-wing of Roosevelt's New Deal coalition, had a number of those who felt that a clearer socialist position should have been articulated in the campaign and the founders of the *Monthly Review* were among these. Einstein personally endorsed and supported the Wallace campaign. He was invited to contribute to the inaugural number of the new journal by Huberman's friend Otto Nathan, who was himself

a left-wing social democrat and a close friend of Einstein (Otto Nathan and Einstein's secretary Helen Dukas were the two trustees named in Einstein's will).

It is clear from Einstein's essay that he is attracted by the socialist critique of capitalism. In characteristic fashion though, Einstein's attraction to this critique is founded in his preoccupation with the role of the individual in society. For Einstein, the individual is, as he argues at length in the first part of the essay, very much a social being. While this fact is unalterable, society itself and thus the 'cultural constitution' that individuals acquire from society (as distinct from the 'biological constitution' that human beings acquire from nature as a species) is susceptible to change. It is this that gives hope that human life may be made more tolerable by striving to change it in a desirable fashion.

In Einstein's view the 'essence of the crisis of our time' is rooted in the individual's relationship to society. Though individuals are ever more dependent on society as a whole and ever more conscious of this dependence, they are unable to perceive this as a 'positive asset' or a 'protective force'. Instead this relationship is perceived as a threat to one's natural rights or even economic existence, leading to a progressive deterioration of an individual's social drives. The real source of this alienation, this 'crippling of the social consciousness of individuals' as Einstein puts it, is in his view due to the economic anarchy of capitalism and the attitudes that it promotes. Only the elimination of the anarchy of capitalism by the establishment of a socialist economy, together with an educational system that is oriented towards social goals rather than inculcating an 'exaggerated competitive attitude' could solve the crisis of the individual in society.

Einstein is careful to note that socialism does not automatically follow once the anarchy of capitalism is eliminated by the establishment of a planned economic system that produces for use and not for profit. For Einstein, as he indicates in the closing lines of the essay, the problem of countering the power of the bureaucracy associated with a planned economy and safeguarding the rights of the individual remains an unsolved one. This is clearly a reference to the Soviet Union of his time and his view that socialism, in the sense of doing away with the alienation of the individual in society, was yet to be established there.

The other notable political issue that occupied Einstein was the Palestine question<sup>17</sup>. Einstein had considerable sympathy for the idea of a Jewish homeland even before the Second World War and was an active supporter of the Zionism of the pre-War period. Though he was born into an irreligious Jewish family, the adult Einstein clearly felt his Jewishness keenly. Einstein always maintained a distanced and objective view of other denominational religions. But he tended to a softer approach on Judaism, viewing it on occasion as rather more of a cultural expression of a particular community than a religion. In this period he was also concerned with promoting Jewish-Arab unity,

spoke out against Jewish extremism and was not in favour of the partition of Palestine.

Subsequent to the horror of the Holocaust (among the victims were several of his relatives and two of his cousins), he was an even more active supporter of the idea of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. But as late as 1946–47, Einstein continued to argue for a Palestine that would be governed under the trusteeship of the United Nations with a constitution that guaranteed that neither the Jews nor the Arabs would outvote each other and disclaimed any sympathy for the idea of an exclusive Jewish state. Paradoxically though, at the same time he maintained his close relations with the Zionist leadership that certainly had a different agenda.

Subsequently when the United Nations ended the British mandate in Palestine and violence broke out between Jews and Arabs, Einstein appealed for an end to fanaticism and violence. With the creation of the state of Israel, Einstein accepted it as a *fait accompli*, and worked to assist the new state, particularly in its scientific development. Mercifully, Einstein passed away before the Palestine question acquired the complexity that we see today.

The record of Einstein's involvement in public affairs and his engagement with the foremost political and social questions of his age is one of remarkable consistency and courage. As in his science, he was not to choose the comfort of conformism. In the pursuit of his political commitments, Einstein was willing and able to engage with the world at large in a manner that had few parallels amongst his colleagues. Einstein, as numerous personal accounts testify, was as at ease in the company of radical political activists who devoted their lives to the cause of the underprivileged, as he was in the company of statesmen and world leaders.

From the question of world peace to the crisis of the individual's relation to society under capitalism, many of the political and social issues that Einstein sought to address continue to be important questions even today. The manner in which he attempted to engage with these issues is no less inspiring today than it was to the world in his day and age.

1. Schlipp, P. A. (ed.), *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist*, The Library of Living Philosophers Inc, Evanston, Illinois, USA, 1949.
2. The record of Einstein's pacifism in the First World War that is presented here is drawn from Pais, A., *Einstein Lived Here*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, pp. 165–169.
3. Pais, A., *Einstein Lived Here*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, pp. 174–176.
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5. Pais, A., *Einstein Lived Here*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, p. 233.
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8. Abstract of lecture by P. Galison at the Stanford University web page <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/news/pr/2004/pr-hofstadter-051805.html>

9. Simon, J., *Albert Einstein, Radical: A Political Profile*. *Monthly Rev.*, May 2005.
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11. Jerome, F., *The Hidden Half-life of Albert Einstein: Anti-Racism. Socialism and Democracy Online*, vol. 33, available at [http://www.sdonline.org/33/fred\\_jerome.htm](http://www.sdonline.org/33/fred_jerome.htm).
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14. Pais, A., *Einstein Lived Here*, 2005, p. 172.
15. Available at the website of the *Monthly Rev.* at <http://www.monthlyreview.org/598einst.htm>
16. Einstein, A., Why Socialism?. In *Ideas and Opinions*, p. 151.
17. The material on Einstein's views on the Palestine question is based on the material in *Ideas and Opinions*, pp. 171–204, and Pais, A., *Einstein Lived Here*, 2005, pp. 242–252.



Einstein and Tagore. Photo courtesy: AIP Emilio Segre Archives.