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Einstein and the Bomb

Albert Einstein began his career as a politically engaged intellectual in the fall of 1914, when he co-authored and signed the antiwar "Manifesto to the Europeans." Written together with Friedrich Nicolai, the manifesto diagnosed the "unleashed barbarity" of war as an inevitable outcome of nationalism and suggested a remedy: "Europe must act as one in order to protect her soil, her inhabitants, and her culture" (p. 66). Until his death in 1956, Einstein wrote hundreds of manifestos, essays, speeches, and private letters that discussed his political worldview and endeavored to influence international politics. In the late 1920s–indeed, after all his great scientific breakthroughs had been accomplished–he wrote as many as two hundred such documents each year. David E. Rowe and Robert Schulmann's *Einstein on Politics* provides an excellent exhibition of Einstein's political interests (from disarmament and Zionism to socialism, Americanization, human rights, and nuclear weapons) and of the powerful eloquence of his prose. To a large extent, despite the diversity of topics and the modifications of Einstein's views over the years, many of the essays reprinted in this volume negotiate the same challenge he emphasized in his initial manifesto: defining the perils of nationalism and contemplating alternative political institutions.

While many of the documents in this volume have been published before, Rowe and Schulmann's collection presents a concise introduction to the essentials of Einstein's worldview and its development over the years. The selection is complemented by a knowledgeable survey of the biographical and political frameworks in which Einstein's views were shaped. It also contains helpful guidance for the interpretation of specific letters and essays within the particular context of their writing. It is, no doubt, an important contribution, perhaps the broadest and the most erudite one, to the "Einstein on" genre, which already includes titles such as *Einstein on Peace*, *Einstein on Race and Racism*, and *Einstein on Zionism.*[1] Yet, like most of the "Einstein on" literature, Rowe and Schulmann's collection seems to be indifferent to the most burning question about Einstein's political views: who cares?

In other words, what is the importance of Einstein's reflections on politics, beyond the anecdotal information about the views of a celebrity-scientist (on topics that had little to do with his expertise)? How, if at all, would the reading of Einstein's thoughts enhance our understanding of the political contexts he sought to influence? Would a meticulous reading of his letters and speeches on pacifism and Jewish nationalism, for instance, change the way we think about the peace movement or the Zionist movement? Notably, the bulk of the literature dedicated to Einstein's life and thoughts underscores his detachment from actual political movements and his marginal impact on national and international politics. The portrayal of Einstein as an outsider, who failed to fully understand–and hence to influence–the different ideological movements of his time, is commonly based on evaluation of his varying views between the years 1929 and 1934. During these years he allegedly deserted his most fundamental convictions: pacifism (following the rise of Nazism) and Zionism (after the 1929 violence in Palestine). Following his alleged "betrayal" of these ideologies, Einstein's friends, colleagues, and opponents described him as naïve, sentimental, or even childish.[2] Scholars often reiterated these views, noting that he merely exhibited a set of "sentiments" and "sensibilities" rather than a coherent worldview (as one scholar put it, Einstein's politics "was largely an emotional response," not an intellectual position).[3] Even Einstein's most sympathetic biographers adhered to this assessment and credited his "confusing" politics to "prophetic insight," a rigorous "scientist mentality," or "romantic"

empathy with his fellow Jews.[4]

Rowe and Schulmann's portrayal of Einstein's political activity seems to support this view. In their otherwise illuminating preface they state: "Einstein had little use for conventional political organizations. Preferring to remain outside of the arena of professional politics, he gave his name to numerous causes, but never joined a political party nor felt himself accountable to any constituency" (p. xxii). This is only partially true. Einstein did resent German parliamentary politics and in particular detested the German Social-Democratic Party (which he blamed in 1934 for the success of Nazism). During the interwar period, however, he was affiliated with some twenty-five political (mostly transnational) organizations. Obviously, for some of these causes he gave his name without paying much attention to their actual activity or to the full implications of their views. Nevertheless, in certain remarkable cases he was fully committed to the objectives and ideology of the organizations he endorsed. One conspicuous example, a highly relevant one for the question of his "marginal" status, was the England-based War Resisters' International (WRI), which propagated conscientious objection. Despite his tendency to discard organizational conformism, in the latter 1920s Einstein seemed to have committed himself to the objectives of the WRI and to its modes of activity. Einstein's prolific contribution to the organization included occasional correspondence with international leaders in order to plea for WRI's causes, as well as numerous public addresses and essays in leading journals (which were otherwise inaccessible to the WRI activists). Einstein's endorsement functioned as an opening motto for the WRI's presentation of its history, objectives, and principles.[5] He was also the honorary chair of the (failed) Einstein Foundation, the main fundraising resource of the organization. Throughout the 1920s, Einstein was repeatedly invited to take part in the organization's conferences, executive meetings, and public discussions. In June 1931 he was offered the title of the WRI Honorary President.

Einstein's relations with the WRI are indeed confusing. As early as 1930 he professed ideas that deviated from those held by the WRI's leaders, most evidently in his "Two Percent Speech," which described conscious objection as a political strategy rather than a moral obligation (p. 240). In numerous correspondences between 1931 and 1934 Einstein not only refused to conform to the WRI leadership's views, but also displayed a comprehensive, well-thought-out political position in which pacifism had a mere functional role. Reiterating ideas he had entertained since 1914, he now emphasized that the combination of political nationalism and the modern state apparatus was the gravest threat to modern civilization. In granting the state unlimited sovereignty, nationalism produced a regime that inevitably demolished individual freedom, social justice, and international peace. Conscientious objection, he believed until the early 1930s, was an efficient means to restrict the sovereignty of the state by stripping it from the ability to wage war. Apparently, similar aspiration to restrict the nation-state also informed his perception of Zionism: his "proposal for the Arabs and Jews" (p. 183) advocated the withdrawal of national institutions and the constitution of a just coexistence negotiated by non-national delegates (e.g., labor union representatives).

Notably, despite his disagreement with the WRI leadership, his views on peace and Zionism were hardly unusual among the activists of the transnational peace movement in the late 1920s (such as Hans Kohn, Franz Kobler, and Martha Steinitz).[7] During this time period, in which he still perceived his positions to be consistent with the WRI's credo, Einstein revised his understanding of effective political activism. Instead of conscientious objection that pressured governments "from below," he gradually shifted his support to supra-national organizations, which would restrict national sovereignty "from above." Einstein was not a political maverick. When he was convinced that the WRI's tactics were ineffective, he again aligned himself with a new (also England-based) political organization, the New Commonwealth Society (NCS). This non-pacifist antiwar organization sought to limit national governments through the establishment of an impartial international tribunal and a global "police force" to enforce its decisions. His shift from the WRI to the NCS was not exceptional. Several Central European liberal antiwar activists, such as Hans Wehberg, Walther Schücking, and Hans Kohn, perceived the premises of the NCS as the answer to the international challenges of the early 1930s (most evidently the crisis in Manchuria). Thus, until 1937, when he resigned from the executive board of this organization, Einstein was a typical activist of the NCS, who subscribed to its declarations, enthusiastically supported its publications, and urged his colleagues to join the organization. Notably, the NCS's emphasis on supra-national regulation of international conflicts also matched Einstein's prognosis for Zionism after his disappointment from the bilateral rejection of his coexistence formula.

The depiction of Einstein as an exceptional political thinker is influenced by the strict categorization of antiwar ideologies–radical versus contingent, absolutist versus integral, or moral versus political pacifism; within this framework, one is driven to conclude, as

Rowe and Schulmann do, that Einstein was a "contingent" pacifist who deserted his conviction because of Adolf Hitler. However, these categories marginalize the anti-nationalist sentiments that were shared by many interwar antiwar activists (both pacifists and non-pacifists), who believed that war is an inevitable byproduct of nationalism and the nation-state. Like Einstein, many of them had experienced the collapse of the multinational Central European empires as young adults, and observed the rise of the European nation-state–together with the rise of violent nationalism and the problem of national minorities–as a devastating threat to the heritage of the Enlightenment.

Considering Einstein as a characteristic–rather than an extraordinary–political activist of the interwar peace movement complements, rather than contradicts, Rowe and Schulmann's selection. The broad focus on "politics" (instead of racism, Zionism, religion, or pacifism, for instance) enables the inclusion of a wide range of topics that corresponds with the many facets of Einstein's career as a public intellectual. Some entries in the section "Science Meets Politics," for instance, speak to the connections between the two major realms in his life. Einstein's politics was not deducted from his science; nor was his science an aspect of his political views. However, his philosophy of science shared much with the principles that made him suspicious of anti-liberal agencies (such as the unrestricted nation-state). As several of his essays and letters testify, the ability to objectively determine truth and justice through reason, which guided his conception of the theory of relativity, had been the major premise of most of his political thought. His impressions from his trips to America–his enthusiasm for its "transnational" nature, his mistrust of the "free market" ethos, and his belief in America's ability to become the guardian of world peace–reflect the ways his perceptions of freedom, equality, and international relations intertwined. Again, similar impressions can be found in the writings of many contemporaneous antiwar activists (and in particular among the ones who supported the NCS in the early 1930s).

The chapter on Einstein's reflections about economics demonstrates the strength and the importance of this collection. In different contexts, Einstein appeared to have endorsed opposing views: from mild communism to fierce anti-bolshevism; from liberal economic theories to skeptical conservatism. Addressing this difficulty, Rowe and Schulmann praise Einstein's refusal "to reduce political matters to black and white terms" (p. 406). They rightly point to his evolving ideas about economics, which reached maturity in the early 1930s, coinciding with the Great Depression and with his growing knowledge of the Russian and American economies. The discussion in this chapter, however, also demonstrates the weakness of *Einstein on Politics*, since it underlines the detachment of Einstein from other intellectuals of his time. Einstein's contemplations were not unique among interwar European liberals, who sought to find remedies for the collapse of nineteenth-century laissez-faire ideology in the post-WWI era. It was a time when thinkers of diverse backgrounds–such as Franz Oppenheimer, Alfred Zimmern, or J. M. Keynes–were searching for new economic principles which would combine liberal ideals, such as individual freedom, with effective monitoring of governments' economic policies. Like these thinkers, Einstein was searching for the political mechanism that would ensure the employment of these ideals. His view of economic morality, nevertheless, was always compatible with the fundamental conviction that had guided his politics since 1914: governments are needed for (and only for) the guaranty of the utmost possible freedom for the individual–freedom of thought and of expression–through the supervision of social justice; that is, through the regulation of the utmost possible equality (mainly, in the legal and the educational arenas). The confusion and evolution of his thoughts, highlighted in this chapter, merely reflected similar developments among his liberal peers (indeed, some of the most prominent among them–such as Zimmern and John Maynard Keynes–also supported the NCS in the early 1930s).

Einstein on Politics introduces the reader to the variety and intensity of Einstein's reflections on politics. Implicitly, it tells the story of the crisis of liberal thought, and the endeavor to face this crisis, in an era that started with the outbreak of World War I and continued into the Cold War. Challenges such as the collapse of the nineteenth-century international order, the unpredicted economic catastrophe, the appeal of fascism and, later, the prospect of a nuclear conflict, prompted prominent intellectuals to conceive new ideas for the social and international order. European liberal intellectuals who witnessed the fall of the multinational empires as mature thinkers, had developed a critical position against most prominent ideologies that grew out of WWI: bolshevism (for it annuls freedom); nationalism–and, to greater extent, fascism (due the unrestricted sovereignty it entails and the unequal treatment of national minorities); and the "American" cult of the free market and its immoral indifference to world politics. We should read Einstein as a prominent representative of this group of (mostly Jewish) liberal thinkers, who constantly tried to consider new political strategies to meet these mounting challenges. This

perspective would make Rowe and Schulmann's book an indispensable source for the studying and teaching of twentieth-century European intellectual history.

Notes

[1]. Otto Nathan and Heinz Norden, *Einstein on Peace* (New York: Schocken Books, 1960); Fred Jerome, *Einstein on Race and Racism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006); and Gerald E. Tauber, *Einstein on Zionism, Arabs and Palestine: A Collection of Papers, Letters, and Speeches in English, Hebrew and Arabic* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1979).

[2]. For instance, Josef Klausner, *Bereshit Haya Haraayon* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1931), 93; and Rolf von Bockel, *Kurt Hiller und die Gruppe Revolutionärer Pazifisten (1926-1933)* (Hamburg: Bormann-Verlag, 1990), 125-129.

[3]. Peter Brock and Nigel Young, *Pacifism in the Twentieth Century* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 122-123. See also Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945: The Defining of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 92; Fritz Stern, "Einstein's Germany," in *Albert Einstein: Historical and Cultural Perspectives,* ed. G. Holton and Y. Elkana (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 329, 331. A recent exception to this rule can be found in Ze'ev Rosenkranz, *Einstein before Israel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[4]. Nathan and Norden, *Einstein on Peace* (New York: Schocken Books, 1960), 214-215; and Walter Isaacson, *Einstein, His Life and Universe* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 414.

[5]. Herbert Runham Brown, *Cutting Ice: A Brief Survey of War Resisters' International* (Middlesex: War Resisters' International, 1930), 3.

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