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Albert Einstein: Radical Citizen and Scientist

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By Peter Dreier, Truthout | Book Excerpt

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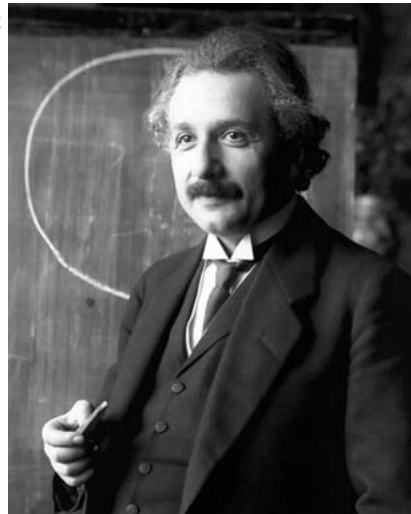
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During a visit to California in 1931, physicist Albert Einstein, then living in Europe, asked to meet actor Charlie Chaplin, also an international celebrity and political radical. Chaplin invited him to the premier of the film "City Lights." As they posed for photographers, Chaplin commented, "They cheer for me because they all understand me and they cheer for you because nobody understands you."

When Time selected Einstein (1879–1955) as its Person of the Century in its December 31, 1999, issue, it was the fourth time (including 1929, 1946 and 1979) that the scientist had appeared on the magazine's cover. Einstein was the world's first celebrity scientist. Today, dozens of different posters of Einstein, often adorned with one of his famous quotes, hang on walls in dorm rooms, school classrooms and offices around the world. People who know almost nothing about Einstein's scientific accomplishments (except, perhaps, that he created something called the theory of relativity, or that he is connected with the formula $E = mc^2$) associate his name and image (including the unruly hair and the baggy sweater) with "genius."



Albert Einstein during a lecture in Vienna in 1921.
(Photo: Ferdinand Schmutzer)

Time picked Einstein as its Person of the Century because he, "changed forever the way the rest of us saw the heavens and ourselves." But Einstein also represented science's potential to change the world itself - to enlist rational thinking and technology to improve the conditions in which we live. Conversely, he also represented science's potential, as in the case of advanced weapons of war, to destroy the world.

Einstein understood this moral and practical dilemma. He did not believe that scientific knowledge, on its own, would save the world. It could be used for good or evil, depending on who had the power to harness science and technology. He thus spent much of his life, in Europe and (after 1933) in the United States, working for peace and social justice. Einstein was a pacifist, a humanist, a socialist and a Zionist. As a scientist, Einstein was a reluctant celebrity, but he recognized that he could use

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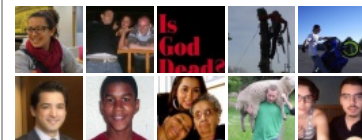
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his fame and reputation to promote causes to make the world more humane and democratic. He did so willingly, regularly joining forces with other scientists and activists to challenge the political establishment.

At different times in his life, he was harassed by both the German and the US governments for his political views. During the cold war, the FBI's file on Einstein grew to over 1,800 pages, listing dozens of allegedly "subversive" organizations that he supported. As biographer Jim Green noted, "his mail was monitored, his phone tapped, his home and office searched and his trash examined." Sen. Joseph McCarthy called Einstein an "enemy of America."

Einstein's passions for science and justice were forged early in his life in Germany. His parents were secular, middle-class Jews. At age five, he was fascinated to learn that invisible forces could move the needle on a compass, sparking a lifelong interest in invisible forces. Seven years later, he read what he called his "sacred little geometry book," which triggered another lifelong passion. At one of his schools, the Prussian-style educational system stifled his original mind and shaped his skepticism toward arbitrary authority. One teacher even told him that he would never amount to anything. Until Einstein was in his mid-twenties, it looked as though his teacher might have been correct.

After attending school in Germany and Switzerland, Einstein entered Zurich's Swiss Federal Polytechnic School in 1896 to become a teacher of physics and mathematics. He earned his diploma in 1901 and became a Swiss citizen, but he was unable to find a teaching job. He eventually got a job as a technical assistant in the Swiss Patent Office. On the job and in his spare time, Einstein devoted himself to physics.

Einstein earned his doctorate in 1905. That year, he published several physics papers that solidified his reputation as a pioneering scientist and, we now know, altered the entire field of modern physics. His biggest scientific breakthrough came in 1919. Two expeditions - one to the Principe Island off the west coast of Africa, the other to Sobral in northern Brazil - were sent to test Einstein's prediction that starlight would be deflected near the sun. A solar eclipse provided evidence supporting his general theory of relativity, which predicted that light would be bent by the sun's gravitational field. In November 1919, the results were announced in London at a joint meeting of the Royal Society and the Royal Astronomical Society. This catapulted Einstein to international fame. The Times of London's headline read, "Revolution in Science - New Theory of the Universe - Newton's Ideas Overthrown - Momentous Pronouncement - Space 'Warped.'" Einstein was invited to lecture around the world, including in the United States in 1921, his first US visit. Wherever he went, huge crowds followed him - and not just scientists.

In 1922 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in physics, "for his services to Theoretical Physics, and especially for his discovery of the law of the photoelectric effect."

Einstein's first serious political activities occurred during World War I, when he got involved with several organizations that opposed German militarism and the war. He was one of a handful of intellectuals who signed a manifesto opposing Germany's entry into war. He called nationalism "the measles of mankind."

Einstein found hope in the Gandhian movement in India and its emphasis on civil disobedience. In a speech in New York in September 1930, he challenged fellow pacifists to replace words with deeds. If only 2 percent of those called up for military service refused to fight, he said, governments would be powerless, because they could not send so many people to prison.

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As a Jew, a radical and a well-known figure, Einstein was an obvious target for Nazi hatred. The Nazis branded Einstein's science "Jewish physics," organized conferences and book burnings to denounce Einstein and his theories, and disrupted his lectures. Understandably, Einstein feared for his life. He and his wife Elsa were visiting the United States in 1933 after Hitler became German chancellor. Rather than return to Berlin, Einstein took a position at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. He renounced his German citizenship and seven years later, became a US citizen. In 1934, he identified the arms industry as, "the hidden evil power behind the nationalism which is rampant everywhere." But that year, seeing the Nazi threat, he also called on the United States and the European nations to prepare for a war against Germany, and he reversed his earlier views about refusing military service. He criticized the US government's neutrality in the Spanish Civil War, which he, like many others, viewed as a battle between fascists and antifascists.

In 1939, more than two years before the United States entered World War II, Einstein wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt warning about the possibility that Germany might be able to build an atomic bomb. He urged the president to mobilize America's scientific community to conduct the research needed to develop atomic weapons. Roosevelt responded quickly, telling Einstein that he had organized a committee to study the issue. Ironically, when America's best scientists moved to Los Alamos, New Mexico, in 1941 for the Manhattan Project to develop the first atomic bomb, Einstein - whose findings had laid the groundwork for the project - was not invited. Years later, the release of FBI files revealed that Einstein had been blacklisted from the project because of his long involvement with peace and socialist organizations. In 1953, he publicly urged Americans to refuse to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, the key organ of the cold war witch hunts.

Einstein would later regret writing his letter to Roosevelt. He was horrified by the human carnage that accompanied the US bombing of Japan in 1945, and he worried about the escalation of the arms race and nuclear weapons during the cold war. In 1954, he told his friend Linus Pauling, "I made one great mistake in my life - when I signed the letter to President Roosevelt recommending that atom bombs be made; but there was some justification - the danger that the Germans would make them."

Although Einstein retired from the Institute for Advanced Study in 1945, he continued to speak out on public issues for the rest of his life. In 1946, he became chair of the new Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists, formed to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, including the hydrogen bomb. Interviewed on Eleanor Roosevelt's television program in 1950, Einstein said, "The idea of achieving security through national armament is, at the present state of military technique, a disastrous illusion." In 1955, shortly before his death, Einstein and philosopher Bertrand Russell persuaded nine other prominent scientists to sign the Russell-Einstein Manifesto calling for the abolition of atomic weapons and of war itself.

In 1948, Einstein supported Henry Wallace's Progressive Party campaign for president; he was part of a coalition of radicals and progressives who admired Wallace's opposition to the cold war, his pro-union views and his support for civil rights. Einstein also often spoke out for the civil rights of African-Americans. He joined a committee to defend the Scottsboro Boys, nine Alabama youths who were falsely accused of rape in 1931 and whose trial became a cause of protest by leftists around the world. He lent his support to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and he corresponded with scholar-activist W. E. B. Du Bois. In 1946, he accepted an invitation from the singer and activist Paul Robeson to co-chair the American Crusade to End Lynching, which the FBI



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considered a subversive organization because its members included radicals trying to pressure President Harry Truman to support a federal law against lynching. That year, almost a decade before the Montgomery bus boycott sparked the modern civil rights movement, Einstein penned an essay, "The Negro Question," in which he called American racism the nation's "worst disease." While effusively praising America's democratic and egalitarian spirit, Einstein noted that Americans' "sense of equality and human dignity is mainly limited to men of white skins." Having lived in the United States for little more than a decade, Einstein wrote, "The more I feel an American, the more this situation pains me."

Einstein coupled his radical views on politics and race relations with equally radical analyses of economics. In a 1931 article, "The World as I See It," he wrote, "I regard class distinctions as unjustified, and, in the last resort, based on force." In a famous 1949 essay, "Why Socialism?" published in the first issue of the journal *Monthly Review*, he noted that "the crippling of individuals" is "the worst evil of capitalism." He criticized capitalism's "economic anarchy" and the "oligarchy of private capital, the enormous power of which cannot be effectively checked even by democratically organized political society." He believed that a socialist economy had to be linked to a political democracy; otherwise, the rights of individuals would be threatened by an "all-powerful and overweening bureaucracy." It was this radical humanism that led him to oppose Soviet communism.

A victim of anti-Semitism as a young scientist in Germany, Einstein became a vocal advocate for a Jewish state that he hoped would liberate Jews from persecution and encourage the flowering of Jewish culture. He hoped that Jews and Arabs would be able to share power and coexist in one country and was disappointed when that did not happen. Once Israel was created in 1948, he became a strong supporter of the nation, which was founded on socialist principles. In 1952, Israel's Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion offered Einstein the presidency of Israel, a ceremonial position. Einstein was flattered, but declined. However, he continued to raise funds and promote the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which he had helped establish and which became a world-renowned institution.

From early adulthood until he died, the rational scientist was also a passionate citizen of the world. A year before his death, Einstein explained that he wrote and spoke out on public issues "whenever they appeared to me so bad and unfortunate that silence would have made me feel guilty of complicity."

For further reading

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