

THE FEDERALIST DEBATE

Papers on Federalism in Europe and the World

Comments

Albert Einstein, Pacifist

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The greatest physicist of all times? Two hundred physicists interviewed in early 2000 by the specialized review *Physics World* had no doubts in answering with an overwhelming majority: Albert Einstein. The German scientist finished well ahead of colleagues of the caliber of Newton, Galileo, Archimedes, Maxwell.

The most representative personality of the 20th century? Experts in various disciplines, interviewed in the same weeks by *Time* magazine, once again had no doubt: Albert Einstein. He finished ahead of figures like Roosevelt, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Picasso. Well, few know it, but the father of relativity, one of the three founding fathers of quantum theory (with Planck and Bohr), the most representative personality of the 20th century and perhaps of the entire millennium, the never-ending myth that became the very icon of science, was a pacifist. But not a detached and naïve pacifist, as somebody has described him. Rather, a militant pacifist, personally engaged and endowed with a great and secular capacity of interpreting his time and of fighting - yes, fighting - for building a desirable future.

It is worth reflecting further about this scientist who dedicated at least half of his public life to pacifist militancy. For two reasons: his extraordinary, topical relevance, and its extraordinary influence on the political history of the 20th century. The story of the pacifist scientist with his head in the clouds, embraced even by some historians of science, is unjustified. Because Einstein, on the contrary, has often been a radical politician, but always with a very clear vision (the two things are not in contradiction). And he has been a militant pacifist always capable of modulating the intensity of his pacifism or, in different words, the quality of his requests on the basis of a detailed analysis of the context, or, to say it in the jargon of the physicists, of the boundary conditions. In short, Einstein's pacifism has never been absolute, but always modeled on the concrete historical reality.

One has just to have a look at his personal history to see that. Many of Einstein's biographers, starting with his friend Abraham Pais, ascribe his pacifism to the fact that he could not countenance, since his boyhood and then adolescence, any form of authoritarianism and militarism. For this reason his pacifism has been defined "instinctive". But it was not at all instinctive, at least not in its content, the first public display of the pacifist Einstein, which took place in 1914. A few months after his arrival in Berlin and few days after the outbreak of the First World War, the young man, just thirty five year old, unknown to the masses and admitted to the elite of Prussian physics on the recommendation of

Max Planck, welcomed to Berlin with great honors by Kaiser Wilhelm in person, did not hesitate to sign a manifesto - his first manifesto - against Prussian militarism, in defiance of police prohibition. But there was not only courage in that act; there was also farsightedness. In the document, drafted together with the biologist Georg Nicolai, Einstein singles out a new character of modern war: the destruction of the cultural fabric and a regression of civilization: "While technology and commerce clearly compel us to recognize the bond between all nations, and thus a common world culture, no war has ever so intensively interrupted the cultural communalism of cooperative work as this present war does".

Einstein and Nicolai suggested a way out from the barbarism of the modern war then raging over the Old Continent: "We ... are firmly convinced that the time has come when Europe must act as one in order to protect her soil, her inhabitants, and her culture. We believe that the will to do this is latently present in many. In expressing this will collectively, we hope that it gathers force. To this end, it seems for the time being necessary that all those who hold European civilization dear, in other words, those who in Goethe's prescient words can be called "good Europeans" join together. ... We wish only to urge and appeal; and if you feel as we do, if you are similarly determined to lend the most far-reaching resonance to the European will, then we ask that you sign."

So, in the midst of war, thirty years before Altiero Spinelli, Ernesto Rossi and Eugenio Colorni, two scientists unknown to most people and with no significant political experience, Albert Einstein and Georg Nicolai, addressed themselves to all the citizens of the Old Continent, asking them to overcome the stockades of nationalism and engage themselves for the unity of Europe - a federation of the United States of Europe - as an antidote to war, and to embark on a virtuous path towards a universal, common civilization. Their words sound extremely topical today, when the idea of a united Europe is in crisis not only in the economic plane, but also and perhaps foremost in the cultural one. Their "Manifesto to Europeans" did not have a great success. Nevertheless, Einstein will not reduce his political engagement. On the contrary, in some ways it was strengthened. During the First World War he will be a militant in a pacifist party by then already underground. Then, after 1919, the year when his General Relativity Theory was tested, he became famous all over the world and able to touch the minds and also the hearts of the masses, from Paris to Tokyo; he then spent all his fame for the pacifist cause. "Do not forget to say that I am a convinced pacifist, who believes that the world has had enough of wars" he wanted to be assured by a journalist that had just interviewed him in 1921. Einstein's peace militancy in those years was unshakeable. It was bolstered by good readings (Kant, Russell) and good contacts (Romain Rolland, the American President Woodrow Wilson, the philosopher Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud). It was perfectly in tune with the pacifist wing of European rationalism, and proceeded along two main routes: internationalism, with the request, reiterated many times, of a democratic government of the world, and anti-militarism, with the request, this too reiterated many times, of a unilateral disarmament of the nations. So, we see Einstein taking part in the project of the Society of Nations and, at the same time, asking young people to refuse in each country to carry out military service.

This phase has been defined as that of Einstein's radical pacifism. Started in 1914, this phase ends between the summer of 1932 and the winter of 1933, when Einstein realizes that in Germany a force,

the Nazis, is coming to power against which the instruments of pacifism have no effect. Even before Adolf Hitler took over power in December 1932, he left Germany. And to his wife Elsa who was leaving their house in Caputh, in the surroundings of Berlin, he said: “Take a look back, because you will not see it ever again”.

Albert Einstein understands before and better than others the nature of Nazism. Its unprecedented violence, which threatens not only Jews and opposers in Germany, but the entire Europe. Or rather, the European civilization itself. To that organized force, Einstein believes, nothing can be opposed but organized force. And he states that publicly; he writes at the end of July 1933 to the Belgian pacifist Alfred Nahon: “What I am going to say will surprise you ... Imagine that Belgium is occupied by today's Germany. Things would be much worse than in 1914, although they were indeed quite bad back then. Therefore, I must tell you candidly: were I a Belgian, I would not refuse, in the present circumstances, the military service, but rather I would carry it out diligently, certain that I would be doing it to save the European civilization. This does not mean that I am abandoning the principle I have been fighting for until now. I sincerely hope that the time will come when refusing the military service will become once again the best method for serving the progress of mankind.”

The European pacifist movement was almost shocked by Einstein's analysis. But the political project he was promoting to counter Hitler was a close alliance between the USA, Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union; an alliance which will be made, but ten years later. Realizing before others that a power was being established so violent as to be impossible to counter it with the usual instruments of our civilization, and foreshadowing a political alliance that will be actually made a decade later are not for sure facts typical of a naïve politician. Nor of an unworldly pacifist. Einstein's thinking is always rational, based on a thoughtful analysis of the context.

And it is precisely such an analysis that drives him in the month of August 1939 to accept the invitation of three Hungarians - Leo Szilard, Eugene Wigner and Edward Teller -, and write to the American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt warning him that: a) physicists have realized the fission of the atom, discovering a new energy source; b) such a source can be utilized for the construction of mass destruction weapons of a devastating power; c) in Germany there are physicists able to develop such weapons; d) Hitler, after his invasion of Czechoslovakia, has come into possession of the needed raw material: uranium. It is necessary then that the United States commits itself to the construction of an atomic weapon: not for actually using it, but as a deterrent against the possible use of a German atomic bomb.

The effects of Einstein's letter to Roosevelt have been perhaps overestimated. For sure it did not have immediate results. In the USA, the Manhattan Project will only start two years later. Einstein is not involved at all. Also and in the first place because of the veto of the FBI, who consider him a dangerous extremist, maybe a friend of the communists. Therefore, it seems completely unfounded to associate him with the actual construction of the atomic bomb. Much less to associate the name of Einstein with the explosions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

On the contrary, before those two immense tragedies took place, in the Spring of 1945, Albert Einstein had already resumed his radical pacifism. In Europe the war is nearing its end. Nazism is defeated. Hence, Einstein believes, the reason for the construction of the atomic bomb has died away. The international context has changed, and he returns a militant and active pacifist. Here he is, then, writing a new letter to Roosevelt, soliciting him to listen to his friend Leo Szilard, who was pleading to suspend the Manhattan Project and block the construction of the mass destruction weapon. But Roosevelt dies and Szilard could not manage to get a fair hearing.

On August 6, 1945, a uranium bomb is dropped over Hiroshima. On August 8, the USSR declares war on Japan. On August 9, a plutonium bomb destroys Nagasaki. On August 15, Emperor Hirohito announces the surrender of Japan. Now everything has changed. In the following months, the pacifist Einstein is once again in the field, alongside the Federation of Atomic Scientists that wants to oppose the “logic of the bomb”. Once again his political clear-sightedness is all but naïve or simplistic.

Albert Einstein understands that the new mass-destruction weapon changes the relation between the military sphere and politics. The logic of the bomb has a dimension of its own, even superior to the logic of the political and ideological contest. And that it is that logic, this time, to jeopardize the survival of civilization. Maybe of mankind itself. Therefore it is necessary to act. On the one hand by resuming the idea of a world government, managed initially by the winning powers of the war. -the USA, Great Britain, France and the USSR - to which the monopoly of the atomic weapon is to be entrusted. And on the other, by mobilizing the masses, in a close and unprecedented alliance with the scientists, in order to avoid becoming familiar with the bomb, and to build a global movement for nuclear disarmament.

On this project Einstein will work until his last days. And the work will reach a high point with the Russell-Einstein Manifesto signed by the German physicist one week before dying. Einstein's life ended on April 18, 1955. The manifesto was made public by Bertrand Russell the following July, and it became both the foundation for the Pugwash Conferences, the movement of scientists struggling actively and analytically for disarmament, and one of the basic texts of the mass movement for peace that, with changing fortunes and deep adjustments, is alive and active to this day.

Has the activity of the pacifist Einstein been that of a visionary, with no effect on the concrete reality of the world? Granted, the race to atomic rearmament was not stopped by the alliance between scientists and the masses envisaged by Einstein when he took in 1946 the Presidency of the Emergency Committee of the Federation of Atomic Scientists. Granted, mankind is still sitting on a powder-keg that could destroy it. But, as the historian Lawrence S. Wittner, of the New York State University, says, if after Hiroshima and Nagasaki the atomic bomb has never been used again, if it became a taboo for everybody, politicians and military people included, that is not due so much to the wisdom of governments and Chiefs of Staff, as to the movement for disarmament, able to mobilize the masses as Albert Einstein wanted.



Between October 11 and 12, 1986, in a summit held in Reykjavik, Iceland, Michail Gorbachev, the last Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party and last President of the USSR, proposed to Ronald Reagan, President of the USA, to dismantle nuclear arsenals. Reagan was a stone's throw from accepting. The project vanished, but a process started for at least reducing the number of nuclear weapons. When, sometime afterwards, Gorbachev was asked where that idea was coming from, the USSR President replied: from Albert Einstein's books and from the proposals of the world pacifist movement. This confirms that the thought of the greatest physicist of all times did have a real influence on world history. An idea - the elimination of all nuclear weapons - as topical as ever.

Translated by Lionello Casalegno