

Research Assignment #2: Albert Einstein on the Origins of Anti-Semitism

It appears as though this particular assignment would serendipitously guide my hand almost seamlessly toward a gem that had been coyly stranded atop the cadre of classics clumsily piled up on the edge of my desk. If I were to use terms that prove somewhat archaic today—yet are most representative of the zeitgeist of the times from which the article I had plucked for this assignment corresponds—this one book is rather queer looking: a bland grey background for a cover, complemented by wavy and cream-like silver strokes that harmoniously weave alongside inky black ones, which assume more of a secondary presence, quietly making its way around the former like a group of wirings in a Silicon Valley startup's server room. Moreover, both the front and back are blank, as far as text goes; on the sealed side the “author” and the name of the work—along with the shorthand name of the publisher—as two sides of a coin smoothly inscribed on a single sheet. It reads, “*EINSTEIN; (FOLIO): IDEAS AND OPINIONS.*”

Unassuming it as it may come across initially, it is verily a worthy read in its entirety—a most noble effort of pooling into a single volume letters from one of the greatest minds in to have ever lived, namely the paragon physicist Albert Einstein (1879-1955). Whether you use it to peruse through his scientific entries or to pick his brain on how one is to lead a well-lived life, the ideas presented in this neat collection are unlikely to fail in stimulating and enriching the fellow reader. Having stated that, and given the specific purposes of this assignment, the remainder of this paper will solely focus on a single entry that was published by *Collier's Magazine* on November 26, 1938, entitled: “*Why Do They Hate the Jews?*”ⁱ

Considering the nature of the magazine, it would be a rather safe bet to say that the intended audience is the general public of the United States in a time in which anti-Semitism was far more common than it is today, for the world was on the cusp of a second and, far more devastating World War. As far as the reasons as to why Einstein had taken the time to write this piece in support of members of his fellow ethnic group (along with dozens of other letters) go, it is kind of complicated. It is implied at the start of the introduction that near the end of his life, when Einstein was a global celebrity, hated finding requests for his opinions on this matter or that continuing to flood his Princeton mailbox. It notes that he had grown since early childhood (and over the course of his later stages in life) to habitually watch events unfold from a distance—and although that was an important factor in enabling Einstein to contribute invaluable insights to science on several occasions, it also caused him to feel a profound sense of loneliness and disconnect, one that would accompany him for most of his life. That, clashing against feelings of guilt for not doing what he thought was enough in assisting humanity through channels that are not science-oriented, per se—not to mention the pensive sadness that tormented him over how he had in a way helped invent the atomic bomb, resulted in a unique profusion of letters and public acts filled with caveats emphasizing that his opinions and actions should not be taken with greater weight than what he perceived was due.ⁱⁱ

In the article Einstein briefly sums up what he believes to be the reasons that either directly gave rise to anti-Semitism as a political, psychological, and sociocultural phenomenon, or subtly provided a fertile ground to it to take root and thereafter thrive. He begins by stating that it is an all too common historical pattern to witness ruling classes attempt to cover up for their own failures by scapegoating minorities that are too scattered and de-

fenseless a people to be able to effectively hold their own against such baseless charges. As evidence for this, Einstein cites the political unrest that took place in Russia near the end of the nineteenth century and yet again in the 1905 shortly following—how the government was swift in pointing fingers toward the Jews, riling the masses against them in both cases. The second example he provides is by far the most noteworthy: post-WWI Germany. He remarks that it was this inhuman tactic that allowed a handful of people to “place the German people in a state of complete bondage.” (Thereby paving the way for what was undoubtedly a series of some of the most unspeakable atrocities to ever be committed in human history...)

Einstein then goes on to name various accounts of the insubstantial accusations that accreted against the Jewish people as time went on. On one such occasion, they allegedly murdered children as a part their rituals. In another, pseudo-scientific books claiming that they were an “inferior” and “dangerous” race were promoted. Yet another instance shows that they were persecuted for invading the culture whilst masquerading as peacefully undergoing cultural assimilation. They were said to be too rigid and set in their ways to successfully integrate into society. (On a side note, does this not uncannily echo an identical tune concerning an issue that is more contemporary?)

Finally, the article concludes by viewing the subject in its broadest sense—a manifestation of a certain part of human nature in one particular historical context. Einstein notes how humans have, for thousands of years, lived within groups and tribes in order to maximize odds of survival and attain levels of prosperity that would be impossible to reach individually. A shared bond of unity was established among such groups via developing their own myths, rituals, and behavioral codes and inculcating them into their youth by

means of enculturation. Of course, this—for all intents and purposes—would mean that when tribe members would encounter others that did not belong to theirs, who adhered to a different set of myths and ethical rules, they would naturally feel threatened and grow defensive—instead of trying to understand what makes others who they are, they would mentally paint them as being somehow tainted, even demonic.

Out of fear, humans constantly strove to relieve themselves from anything in their immediate environment that did not seem to conform to the collective will of the tribe. Although this was an evolutionary necessity at the time, modern history tends to view it as the key obstacle holding humanity back from achieving desirable degrees of cooperation and coexistence in a diverse society. The article ends by asserting that uniformity across all nations and communities is not the way to go, but rather finding healthy and constructive ways for expressing our differences across the broad spectrum that is humanity without violating the rights of others.

Historical Questions:

- 1- Is the Jewish experience of anti-Semitism during period immediately after WWI and extending to the years directly following WWII strikingly relevant in the parallels that they draw with the acts of bigotry committed against Muslim minorities in the West in the present day?
- 2- What role should the West assume in solving the Syrian Refugee Crisis? Do there exist legitimate security concerns warranting caution in the United States and European countries taking in Syrian refugees in large numbers, or are such claims inaccurate? Overall, in the light of a steady trend of Muslims opting to settle in the West, what kind of immigration policy should Western countries embrace, and why?

ⁱ Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, trans. Sonja Bargmann (London: The Folio Society), 179-182.

ⁱⁱ Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, xiii-xvii.