

istration necessarily has to be from second-hand sources. It is through these that we learn that Putin “used law enforcement to destroy his rivals,” and created “pliant, fake opposition parties.” The elections have been “rigged” and there was “massive fraud in the 2011 parliamentary elections.” Police use fake bomb threats as a ruse to break up opposition meetings. She speaks of Putin’s “coterie of corrupt oligarchs.” Interestingly, Russians’ use of the Internet is “relatively unfettered,” with information freely available through “a huge community of bloggers.”

To what degree *Putin Country: A Journey Into the Real Russia* adequately describes Russia today is something each reader will have to judge. Garrels’ experience and credentials testify loudly in its favor, while her evident predilections suggest her account tells us as much about her, and the Western opinion she reflects, as it does about Russia. As is true with all reviews, the book contains much more than we have been able to cover. It’s on an important subject, and we recommend it to the discriminating reader.

Dwight D. Murphey

### **Einstein: His Life and Universe**

Walter Isaacson

*Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2007*

(Basis for *Genius*, the ten-part National Geographic series, 2017,  
Starring Geoffrey Rush)

When Walter Isaacson wrote this book and *National Geographic* did the ten-part series based on it that began its run in April 2017, they were wise not to attempt an exhaustive study of contemporary physics. To do that would have lost readers in material far beyond most people’s grasp (including this reviewer’s). *Einstein: His Life and Universe* serves its readers well by settling for something far different than a textbook. What it does do is to provide a lucid window into the advanced theories of the past century, while necessarily leaving readers with as many questions as it answers. As to the physics, it is a highly intelligent introduction to such things as the law of the photoelectric effect (for which, oddly enough, Einstein won his only Nobel Prize), the Special and General Theories of Relativity, the curvature of “spacetime,” the mysteries of Quantum Theory, and much else. For the educated lay-

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man who is not himself a physicist, this book deserves a place alongside Brian Greene's fascinating *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality*.

What interests us most, however, in the context of this journal on social, political and economic studies, is what we are told about twentieth century intellectual culture by Albert Einstein's manner of life and thinking on social issues, together with Isaacson's own ideological frame of reference as his biographer. Although always distinctive by virtue of his own inimitable persona, Einstein's outlook on life, people and society was rather representative of the generations of intellectuals who during his lifetime wrote for the *New Republic* and *The Nation* in the United States. Isaacson, too, falls into that genre, either accepting or providing a gloss for the sentiments voiced by Einstein. In what follows, we will discuss what the book indicates about the thinking of both men.

Isaacson stresses that a key to Einstein's remarkable departures from the physics that had come down from Newton was his "imaginative nonconformity." That willingness to go contrary to received opinion opened the door for him to think afresh as, in the early twentieth century, he introduced his amazing new discoveries; and it was equally evident later in his life as he swam against the current by his long and lonely quest for a "unified field theory" which, he hoped unsuccessfully, would resolve the seeming absurdities of the Quantum Theory that had become the new consensus. Along the way, he was much honored and even became a world celebrity; but in his science he both collaborated with the other brilliant minds and struck out on his own. When Isaacson speaks of Einstein's "imaginative" aspect, what he is referring to is a mind engrossed in "thought experiments" and flights of intuition, with testable hypotheses following in their wake.

Einstein's way of life and social thought, however, could hardly be considered nonconformist if considered within the intellectual milieu of which he was a part. For want of a better description, it is apt to use what seems like an oxymoron: "the moderately far left." It was a milieu characteristic of the intelligentsia of Europe and the United States: anti-bourgeois, mostly flirtatious with but episodically repelled by what it saw as the great Soviet experiment, in any event stoutly anti-anti-Communist, pacifist and anti-nationalist, and mainly secular as to religion — but all with a generous admixture of inconsistency, led by the need to adapt ideology to changing left-oriented imperatives as they arose. One could hardly say Einstein was a nonconformist in that context. His

nonconformity was, rather, that of his entire group in contrast to the mainstream of society.

Although Isaacson says Einstein spent most of his childhood in “a respectable bourgeois existence,” he somehow came to harbor a persistent dislike for “philistines.” He made his first wife promise, Isaacson says, “that marriage would not turn them into a comfortable bourgeois couple.” Even though he did marry, he thought marriage a “moral prejudice, which is still very much alive in the old generation.” Those who are familiar with the West’s intellectual history will recognize alienation against the commercial middle class as having for over two centuries been a prime mover in ideology, the arts, literature, politics and culture. (Indeed, the surprising thing is that the animus has run against virtually all elements of the population except those who have at a given time been ideological or political allies of the intellectual subculture.) Without appreciating the breadth and intensity of this alienation, it is hardly possible to understand American and European history since the early nineteenth century.

A subject that should spur some serious thought is raised by Einstein’s oft-repeated blank condemnation of large categories of people. We have already noted his disdain for ‘philistines’ and the bourgeoisie. Another category, quite a broad one, was the Germans. He spoke of “their brutality and cowardice,” and said “I have never had a particularly favorable opinion” of them. After the Second World War, he condemned them “as a whole nation” who “should be punished as a people.” This post-war condemnation could be attributed to the psychology so typical of wartime, but his animus against them was of far longer standing than that would suggest. What needs to be pondered is whether his dumping of millions of people into a communal pit, taking them collectively rather than as persons in their own right, isn’t the same sort of bigotry that is universally condemned — indeed, considered to place someone beyond the moral pale — when it is asserted against others. The world’s thinking about ethnicities has many double standards. If we pass over this feature of Einstein’s thought without noticing it, that would serve as a silent testament to our having yet another when it comes to bigotry.

Einstein allowed himself an easy flexibility when it came to his religious and national identities. As to both, it was more a matter of adapting to whatever circumstances demanded than it was of having fixed loyalties. He did have a passion for Judaism when he was nine, but reacted against religion by the time he was twelve. He continued to be

“alienated from his heritage” until “later in life” he began “to reconnect with his Jewish identity.” When (before the reconnection) he applied for Austro-Hungarian citizenship, he found that listing himself, as he usually did, as an “unbeliever” or “dissenter” would prompt a rejection. So he put himself down as “Mosaic,” and was accepted. As to citizenship, he preferred none, thinking people should consider themselves “citizens of the world”; but given the exigencies of his highly mobile life, he bounced around between German citizenship (twice), Swiss, Austro-Hungarian, and American.

It’s no big thing, other than as a glimpse into Einstein’s rather narcissistic character, to notice how he felt himself above the petty requirements of the law. Isaacson tells us that although when Einstein was divorced the decree said he could not remarry within two years, he ignored this and did so within four months. Somewhat later, he and his new wife remodeled their home “in defiance of building codes.” The narcissism was most apparent, of course, for all the world to see (and in fact to relish), in the affectations with which he so greatly embellished the absent-mindedness that came with his genius. He came to be universally recognized for his avuncular professorial demeanor, frazzled hair standing on end, and “shabby attire with trousers too short for him.” His second wife gave him a hairbrush, but he soon “reverted to slovenly ways and told her, only half jokingly, that it was to guard against the philistines and the bourgeoisie.” In this, we recognize a form of Dadaism: art as anti-art, precisely to reject existing conventions. (This has taken many forms within the artistic-literary avant-garde subculture for well over a century, with Einstein’s frumpiness just a minor example of something much larger that has had enormous impact in art and literature, and has sometimes been stridently revolutionary.)

A surprising thing about Einstein’s socio-political thinking was that he wasn’t able to think through to the implications of a position the way he was in physics. Eventualities that were clearly foreseeable would come home to roost and force him to contradict an earlier enthusiasm. The genius he showed in physics didn’t create a mentality that on other things could see beyond an initial infatuation. Isaacson quotes novelist Romain Rolland as saying that “Einstein tended to become impractical once outside the scientific field,” but “impractical” doesn’t capture the essence of what was actually a serious intellectual deficiency.

We see this with respect to the pacifism to which Einstein was long committed. He told a reporter that if another war broke out, even

with one side “clearly the aggressor,... I would unconditionally refuse all war service, direct or indirect...” But after Hitler came to power, Isaacson says, “he even went so far as to proclaim the unthinkable: he himself would join the army [to oppose Hitler] if he were a young man.” Though this appears a mundane statement, it shocked the pacifist group to which he sent it. In his letter, he gave as his rationale that “today we face an altogether different situation.” Even when he made his statement to the reporter and spoke hypothetically of a case in which there would be a “clear aggressor,” that didn’t suggest to him that his pacifism would have limits. In other words, he didn’t comprehend that he had accepted pacifism without fully considering it. His eventual abandonment of this naïve idealism was such that he was able to write President Franklin Roosevelt suggesting development of the atom bomb (arguably the least pacifist thing someone could do). When the state of Israel was being created, he at first denounced Menachem Begin’s “terrorist” methods, but then changed his mind and justified “methods that are repulsive and stupid to us.”

A similar trajectory produced an eventual inconsistency about his years-long opposition to nationalism. He had not thought ahead to the possibility of a national entity he might find desirable — but when Israel came along, that introduced an element he had not considered. His rationale is worth attention: “I am, as a human being, an opponent of nationalism. But as a Jew, I am from today a supporter of the Zionist effort.” The implications of this are broader than the point we have just made — that an insufficiently thought-out premise had to be modified because of something pretty obvious that Einstein hadn’t thought of before. Notice this: what Einstein was in effect saying was that a certain form of tribalism, one to which he was strongly attached, justified nationalism. His mind didn’t take him to the next step — into an empathetic understanding that virtually all other human beings have similar deep affinities to tribalisms (and hence nationalities) of their own. He didn’t realize that, unless he was willing to argue that Zionism was a special case, his exception obliterated his long-held principle.

In the instances we’ve mentioned, eventual inconsistencies revealed the shallowness of Einstein’s social thought. With regard to his commitment to world federalism, however, it is sufficient to notice that, once again, his failure to think beyond the surface is apparent on its face. Indeed, it was one of Einstein’s own friends, J. Robert Oppenheimer, who in a letter of Einstein pointed out the folly of world government: “The

history of this nation through the Civil War,” he wrote, “shows how difficult the establishment of a federal authority can be when there are profound differences in the values of the societies it attempts to integrate.”

Those who wonder about the compatibility of religion with empirical science will find Einstein’s many references to a God interesting. One of his favorite expressions was that “God would not play dice” with the universe. He said that “when I am judging a theory, I ask myself whether, if I were God, I would have arranged the world in such a way.” He even used such animism when attributing consciousness to an electron: “I find the idea quite intolerable that an electron should choose of its own free will not only its moment to jump off but also its direction.” For a while, one suspects these are all figures of speech, and presumes they are not to be taken literally. It turns out, however, that Einstein *did* believe in a teleological ordering of the universe — a God in the usual sense. “My religiosity consists [in a] deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe.” That, he said, “forms my idea of God.” He seems not to have been troubled by the “unscientific” nature of such a belief, if we understand science to require hypotheses to be testable. He was apparently able to compartmentalize his thinking, most likely without giving thought to the incompatibility.

One might think Einstein’s openness to teleology would have steered him away from the sort of determinism embraced by many scientists that denies “free will” and a role of consciousness in directing human behavior. Here, however, he joined those contemporaries in adhering to strict causality. Isaacson says “this belief in causal determinism... was, at least in Einstein’s mind, incompatible with human free will... [H]is belief in strict determinism made it difficult for him to accept the idea of moral choice and individual responsibility...” In 1932, Einstein told the Spinoza Society that “human beings in their thinking, feeling and acting are not free but are as causally bound as the stars in their motions.” We have seen that he was able to compartmentalize his thinking, and we see it again when he denied moral choice while at the same time making moral judgments of his own about good and bad. Isaacson says Einstein “was a deeply moral man” — an assessment that would make no sense if Einstein had no moral choice.

Einstein was born in 1879, and so was almost forty when Communism took over in Russia. For many years after the Bolsheviks took power, the West’s intelligentsia was deeply preoccupied with Communism

and events within the Soviet Union. The enthusiasms and pilgrimages of the 1920s were followed by the intensities of attraction and revulsion in the 1930s, with the latter prompted by the Stalin purge trials and the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Our earlier characterization of Einstein as “moderately far left” seems apt in describing his place in all that, although there is much that Isaacson seems to gloss over. We are told that Einstein found reasons to excuse Stalin’s actions and couldn’t associate himself with the cries of anguish that came from so many of his contemporaries as Trotskyites and a whole generation of Old Bolsheviks came up for trial (and, most often, execution). The Hitler-Stalin Pact also caused much revulsion on the far left, but we missed it if Isaacson told whether Einstein shared that reaction. In the mid-1930s, Einstein sat for a bust by the Soviet Realist Russian sculptor Sergei Konenkov, and later took Konenkov’s wife as a mistress until she returned to Moscow from Greenwich Village in 1945. Isaacson says Einstein didn’t know she was a Soviet spy. Isaacson puts a nice gloss on it when he describes it as “an effort at moderation” when Einstein wrote U.S. judge Irving Kaufman asking that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg “be spared the death penalty” after their conviction as atomic spies. Gloss is again applied when Isaacson refers (without giving details) to Einstein’s support for Communist front organizations: “Nor did it help that he had an earnest willingness to lend his name to almost any worthy-sounding manifesto or masthead that arrived in his mail, without always determining whether the groups involved might be fronts for other agendas.”

It took anti-Communism to really stir Einstein’s ire, bringing him to near-hysteria. The Left saw the early 1950s as years of a “Red Scare” in the United States, and Einstein reacted strongly: Isaacson says “the atmosphere reminded him of the rising Nazism and anti-Semitism of the 1930s. ‘The German calamity of years ago repeats itself,’ he lamented.” Also by Einstein: “The reactionary politicians have managed to instill suspicions of all intellectual efforts... All the intellectuals in this country, down to the youngest student, have become completely intimidated... We have come a long way toward the establishment of a Fascist regime.” (This reviewer was in college during those years, and he can tell you the left was far from intimidated. In fact, it insisted that only its voice be heard.)

As we have seen, *Einstein: His Life and Universe* provides a window into Isaacson’s own worldview, as well as Einstein’s. We mentioned earlier that he gives a highly lucid account of modern physics, including, of

course, insights into Einstein's discoveries. That in itself makes the book an outstanding read. But, as with Einstein, our interest here is primarily in the socio-political aspects. In a number of connections Isaacson either agrees with or glosses over Einstein's moderately far left worldview.

At several points, Isaacson says Einstein was a "democratic socialist" with "a strong devotion to individual liberty." He presents this at face value, as though the two were not contradictories. We recall, however, that until the Bad Godesberg program was adopted in Germany in 1959 even the non-Communist Left favored state control of industry and the abolition of private property. Economic freedom was not a part of its "individualism." This separated it sharply from classical liberalism, which feared the power of government and considered a market economy indispensable to personal freedom. We know the Left has a very different perception of "individual freedom," but the differing perceptions have been such a bone of contention over the past two centuries that it is surprising that Isaacson could feel content to present just the one view without so much as a passing nod to the other.

It is odd, too, that "fear of government" didn't follow in the train of the abhorrence of everything right-wing. The assumption seems to have been that, unlike something from the right, democratic socialism or world federalism would necessarily be benign — and despite the concentrated power of government they would entail, would never be an instrument for purposes different from what Einstein or Isaacson had in mind. Perhaps we see here yet another inability to think beyond the surface.

Although the book gives serious and extensive attention to modern physics, it is easily readable and well within the grasp of attentive readers. Nevertheless, readers will do well to keep in mind its confusions and biases. We realize, however, that for the book to be used as the basis for a successful film series today nothing other than a comfortable conformity to the prevailing intellectual Zeitgeist would be acceptable. This is something Isaacson provides well.

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